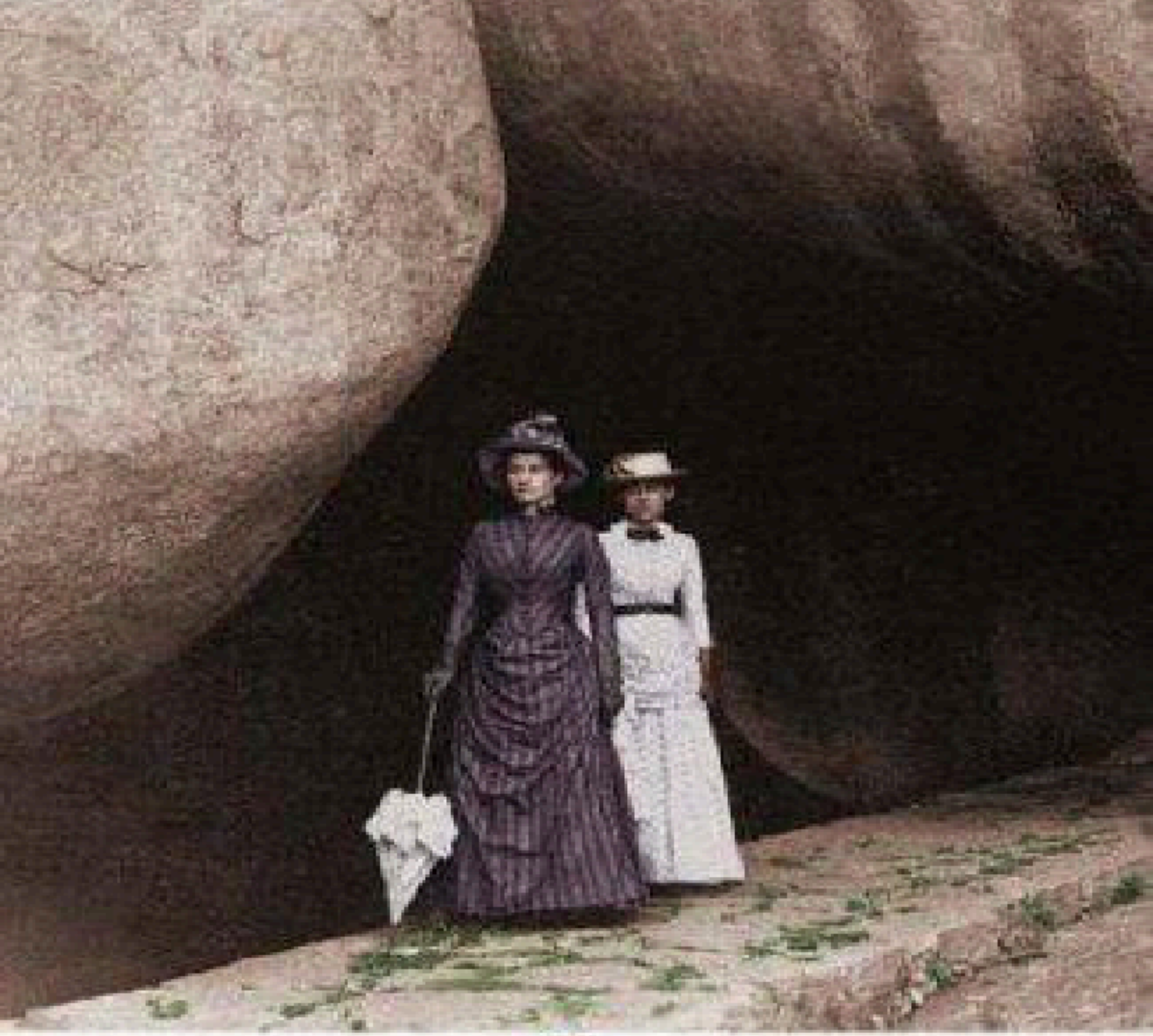

PENGUIN CLASSICS

E. M. FORSTER

A Passage to India

With an introduction by PANKAJ MISHRA

E.M. Forster A PASSAGE TO INDIA

First published in 1924

To

SYED ROSS MASOOD AND TO THE SEVENTEEN YEARS OF OUR FRIENDSHIP

A PASSAGE TO INDIA

PART I: MOSQUE

CHAPTER I

Except for the Marabar Caves--and they are twenty miles off--the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. There are no bathing-steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river front, and bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest. Chandrapore was never large or beautiful, but two hundred years ago it lay on the road between Upper India, then imperial, and the sea, and the fine houses date from that period. The zest for decoration stopped in the eighteenth century, nor was it ever democratic. There is no painting and scarcely any carving in the bazaars. The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving. So abased, so monotonous is everything that meets the eye, that when the Ganges comes down it might be expected to wash the excrescence back into the soil. Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life. Inland, the prospect alters. There is an oval Maidan, and a long sallow hospital. Houses belonging to Furasians stand on the high ground by the railway station. Beyond the railway--which runs parallel to the river-- the land sinks, then rises again rather steeply. On the second rise is laid out the little civil station, and viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts. It is a tropical pleasaunce washed by a noble river. The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and pepul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in their turn hide the bazaars. They rise from the gardens where ancient tanks nourish them, they burst out of stifling purlieus and unconsidered temples. Seeking light and air, and endowed with more strength than man or his works, they soar above the lower deposit to greet one another with branches and beckoning leaves, and to build a city for the birds. Especially after the rains do they screen what passes below, but at all times, even when scorched or leafless, they glorify the city to the English people who inhabit the rise, so that new-corners cannot believe it to be as meagre as it is described, and have to be driven down to acquire disillusionment. As for the civil station itself, it provokes no emotion. It charms not; neither does it repel. It is sensibly planned, with a red-brick club on its brow, and farther back a grocer's and a cemetery, and the bungalows are disposed along roads that intersect at right angles. It has nothing hideous in it, and only the view is beautiful; it shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky. The sky too has its changes, but they are less marked than those of the vegetation and the river. Clouds map it tip at times, but it is normally a dome of blending tints, and the main tint blue. By day the blue will pale down into white where it touches the white of the land, after sunset it has a new circumference--orange, melting upwards into tenderest purple. But the core of blue persists, and so it is by night. Then the stars hang like lamps from the immense vault. The distance between the vault and them is as nothing to the distance behind them, and that farther distance, though beyond colour, last freed itself from blue. The sky settles everything--not only climates and seasons but when the earth shall be beautiful. By herself she can do little--only feeble outbursts of flowers. But when the sky chooses, glory can rain into the Chandrapore bazaars or a benediction pass from horizon to horizon. The sky can do this because it is so strong and so enormous. Strength comes from the sun, infused in it daily; size from the prostrate earth. No mountains infringe on the curve. League after league the earth lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again. Only in the south, where a group of fists and fingers are thrust up through the soil, is the endless expanse interrupted. These fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves.

CHAPTER II

Abandoning his bicycle, which fell before a servant could catch it, the young man sprang up on to the verandah. He was all animation. "Hamidullah, Hamidullah! am I late?" he cried. "Do not apologize," said his host. "You are always late." "Kindly answer my question. Am I late? Has Mahmoud Ali eaten all the food? If so I go elsewhere. Mr. Mahmoud Ali, how are you?" "Thank you, Dr. Aziz, I am dying." "Dying before your dinner? Oh, poor Malimoud Ali!" "Hamidullah here is actually dead. He passed away just as you rode up on

your bike." "Yes, that is so," said the other. "Imagine us both as addressing you from another and a happier world." "Does there happen to be such a thing as a hookah in that happier world of yours?" "Aziz, don't chatter. We are having a very sad talk." The hookah had been packed too tight, as was usual in his friend's house, and bubbled sulkily. He coaxed it. Yielding at last, the tobacco jetted up into his lungs and nostrils, driving out the smoke of burning cow dung that had filled them as he rode through the bazaar. It was delicious. He lay in a trance, sensuous but healthy, through which the talk of the two others did not seem particularly sad--they were discussing as to whether or no it is possible to be friends with an Englishman. Mahmoud Ali argued that it was not, Hamidullah disagreed, but with so many reservations that there was no friction between them. Delicious indeed to lie on the broad verandah with the moon rising in front and the servants preparing dinner behind, and no trouble happening. "Well, look at my own experience this morning." "I only contend that it is possible in England," replied Hamidullah, who had been to that country long ago, before the big rush, and had received a cordial welcome at Cambridge. "It is impossible here. Aziz! The red-nosed boy has again insulted me in Court. I do not blame him. He was told that he ought to insult me. Until lately he was quite a nice boy, but the others have got hold of him." "Yes, they have no chance here, that is my point. They come out intending to be gentlemen, and are told it will not do. Look at Lesley, look at Blakiston, now it is your red-nosed boy, and Fielding will go next. Why, I remember when Turton came out first. It was in another part of the Province. You fellows will not believe me, but I have driven with Turton in his carriage-- Turton! Oh yes, we were once quite intimate. He has shown me his stamp collection." "He would expect you to steal it now. Turton! But red-nosed boy will be far worse than Turton!" "I do not think so. They all become exactly the same, not worse, not better. I give any Englishman two years, be he Turton or Burton. It is only the difference of a letter. And I give any Englishwoman six months. All are exactly alike. Do you not agree with me?" "I do not," replied Mahmoud Ali, entering into the bitter fun, and feeling both pain and amusement at each word that was uttered. "For my own part I find such profound differences among our rulers. Red-nose mumbles, Turton talks distinctly, Mrs. Turton takes bribes, Mrs. Red-nose does not and cannot, because so far there is no Mrs. Red-nose." "Bribes?" "Did you not know that when they were lent to Central India over a Canal Scheme, some Rajah or other gave her a sewing machine in solid gold so that the water should run through his state?" "And does it? "No, that is where Mrs. Turton is so skilful. When we poor blacks take bribes, we perform what we are bribed to perform, and the law discovers us in consequence. The English take and do nothing. I admire them." "We all admire them. Aziz, please pass me the hookah." "Oh, not yet--hookah is so jolly now." "You are a very selfish boy." He raised his voice suddenly, and shouted for dinner. Servants shouted back that it was ready. They meant that they wished it was ready, and were so understood, for nobody moved. Then Hamidullah continued, but with changed manner and evident emotion. "But take my case--the case of young Hugh Bannister. Here is the son of my dear, my dead friends, the Reverend and Mrs. Bannister, whose goodness to me in England I shall never forget or describe. They were father and mother to me, I talked to them as I do now. In the vacations their Rectory became my home. They entrusted all their children to me--I often carried little Hugh about--I took him up to the Funeral of Queen Victoria, and held him in my arms above the crowd." "Queen Victoria was different," murmured Mahmoud Ali. "I learn now that this boy is in business as a leather merchant at Cawnpore. Imagine how I long to see him and to pay his fare that this house may be his home. But it is useless. The other Anglo-Indians will have got hold of him long ago. He will probably think that I want something, and I cannot face that from the son of my old friends. Oh, what in this country has gone wrong with everything, Vakil Sahib? I ask you." Aziz joined in. "Why talk about the English? Brrrr . . . ! Why be either friends with the fellows or not friends? Let us shut them out and be jolly. Queen Victoria and Mrs. Bannister were the only exceptions, and they're dead." "No, no, I do not admit that, I have met others." "So have I," said Mahmoud Ali, unexpectedly veering. "All ladies are far from alike." Their mood was changed, and they recalled little kindnesses and courtesies. "She said 'Thank you so much' in the most natural way." "She offered me a lozenge when the dust irritated my throat." Hamidullah could remember more important examples of angelic ministration, but the other, who only knew Anglo-India, had to ransack his memory for scraps, and it was not surprising that he should return to "But of course all this is exceptional. The exception does not prove the rule. The average woman is like Mrs. Turton, and, Aziz, you know what she is." Aziz did not know, but said he did. He too generalized from his disappointments--it is difficult for members of a subject race to do otherwise. Granted the exceptions, he agreed that all Englishwomen are haughty and venal. The gleam passed from the conversation, whose wintry surface unrolled and expanded interminably. A servant announced dinner. They ignored him. The elder men had reached their eternal politics, Aziz drifted into the garden. The trees smelt sweet--green-blossomed champak--and scraps of Persian poetry came into his head. Dinner, dinner, dinner . . . but when he returned to the house for it, Mahmoud Ali had drifted away in his turn, to speak to his sais. "Come and see my wife a little then," said Hamidullah, and they spent twenty minutes behind the purdah. Hamidullah Begum was a distant aunt of Aziz, and the only female relative he had in Chandrapore, and she had much to say to him on this occasion about a family circumcision that had been celebrated with imperfect pomp. It was difficult to get away, because until they had had their dinner she would not begin hers, and consequently prolonged her remarks in case they should suppose she was impatient. Having censured the circumcision, she bethought her of kindred topics, and asked Aziz when he was going to be married. Respectful but irritated, he answered, "Once is enough." "Yes, he has done his duty," said Hamidullah. "Do not tease him so. He carries on his family,

two boys and their sister." "Aunt, they live most comfortably with my wife's mother, where she was living when she died. I can see them whenever I like. They are such very, very small children." "And he sends them the whole of his salary and lives like a low-grade clerk, and tells no one the reason. What more do you require him to do?" But this was not Hamidullah Begum's point, and having courteously changed the conversation for a few moments she returned and made it. She said, "What is to become of all our daughters if men refuse to marry? They will marry beneath them, or--" And she began the oft-told tale of a lady of Imperial descent who could find no husband in the narrow circle where her pride permitted her to mate, and had lived on unwed, her age now thirty, and would die unwed, for no one would have her now. While the tale was in progress, it convinced the two men, the tragedy seemed a slur on the whole community; better polygamy almost, than that a woman should die without the joys God has intended her to receive. Wedlock, motherhood, power in the house--for what else is she born, and how can the man who has denied them to her stand up to face her creator and his own at the last day? Aziz took his leave saying "Perhaps . . but later . . ."--his invariable reply to such an appeal. "You mustn't put off what you think right," said Hamidullah. "That is why India is in such a plight, because we put off things." But seeing that his young relative looked worried, he added a few soothing words, and thus wiped out any impression that his wife might have made. During their absence, Mahmoud Ali had gone off in his carriage leaving a message that he should be back in five minutes, but they were on no account to wait. They sat down to meat with a distant cousin of the house, Mohammed Latif, who lived on Hamidullah's bounty and who occupied the position neither of a servant nor of an equal. He did not speak unless spoken to, and since no one spoke kept unoffended silence. Now and then he belched, in compliment to the richness of the food. A gentle, happy and dishonest old man; all his life he had never done a stroke of work. So long as some one of his relatives had a house he was sure of a home, and it was unlikely that so large a family would all go bankrupt. His wife led a similar existencc some hundreds of miles away--he did not visit her, owing to the expense of the railway ticket. Presently Aziz chaffed him, also the servants, and then began quoting poetry, Persian, Urdu, a little Arabic. His memory was good, and for so young a man he had read largely; the themes he preferred were the decay of Islam and the brevity of Love. They listened delighted, for they took the public view of poetry, not the private which obtains in England. It never bored them to hear words, words; they breathed them with the cool night air, never stopping to analyse; the name of the poet, Hafiz, Hali, Iqbal, was sufficient guarantee. India--a hundred Indias--whispered outside beneath the indifferent moon, but for the time India seemed one and their own, and they regained their departed greatness by hearing its departure lamented, they felt young again because reminded that youth must fly. A servant in scarlet interrupted him; he was the chuprassi of the Civil Surgeon, and he handed Aziz a note. "Old Callendar wants to see me at his bungalow," he said, not rising. "He might have the politeness to say why." "Some case, I daresay." "I daresay not, I daresay nothing. He has found out our dinner hour, that's all, and chooses to interrupt us every time, in order to show his power." "On the one hand he always does this, on the other it may be a serious case, and you cannot know," said Hamidullah, considerately paving the way towards obedience. "Had you not better clean your teeth after pan?" "If my teeth are to be cleaned, I don't go at all. I am an Indian, it is an Indian habit to take pan. The Civil Surgeon must put up with it. Mohammed Latif, my bike, please." The poor relation got up. Slightly immersed in the realms of matter, he laid his hand on the bicycle's saddle, while a servant did the actual wheeling. Between them they took it over a tintack. Aziz held his hands under the ewer, dried them, fitted on his green felt hat, and then with unexpected energy whizzed out of Hamidullah's compound. "Aziz, Aziz, imprudent boy. . . ." But he was far down the bazaar, riding furiously. He had neither light nor bell nor had he a brake, but what use are such adjuncts in a land where the cyclist's only hope is to coast from face to face, and just before he collides with each it vanishes? And the city was fairly empty at this hour. When his tyre went flat, he leapt off and shouted for a tonga. He did not at first find one, and he had also to dispose of his bicycle at a friend's house. He dallied furthermore to clean his teeth. But at last he was rattling towards the civil lines, with a vivid sense of speed. As he entered their arid tidiness, depression suddenly seized him. The roads, named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India. He felt caught in their meshes. When he turned into Major Callendar's compound he could with difficulty restrain himself from getting down from the tonga and approaching the bungalow on foot, and this not because his soul was servile but because his feelings--the sensitive edges of him-- feared a gross snub. There had been a "case" last year--an Indian gentleman had driven up to an official's house and been turned back by the servants and been told to approach more suitably--only one case among thousands of visits to hundreds of officials, but its fame spread wide. The young man shrank from a repetition of it. He compromised, and stopped the driver just outside the flood of light that fell across the verandah. The Civil Surgeon was out. "But the sahib has left me some message?" The servant returned an indifferent "No." Aziz was in despair. It was a servant whom he had forgotten to tip, and he could do nothing now because there were people in the hall. He was convinced that there was a message, and that the man was withholding it out of revenge. While they argued, the people came out. Both were ladies. Aziz lifted his hat. The first, who was in evening dress, glanced at the Indian and turned instinctively away. "Mrs. Lesley, it _is_ a tonga," she cried. "Ours?" enquired the second, also seeing Aziz, and doing likewise. "Take the gifts the gods provide, anyhow," she screeched, and both jumped in. "0 Tonga wallah, club, club. Why doesn't the fool go?" "Go, I will pay you to-morrow," said Aziz to the driver, and as they went off he called courteously, "You are most welcome, ladies." They did not reply, being full of their

own affairs. So it had come, the usual thing--just as Mahmoud Ali said. The inevitable snub--his bow ignored, his carriage taken. It might have been worse, for it comforted him somehow that Mesdames Callendar and Lesley should both be fat and weigh the tonga down behind. Beautiful women would have pained him. He turned to the servant, gave him a couple of rupees, and asked again whether there was a message. The man, now very civil, returned the same answer. Major Callendar had driven away half an hour before. "Saying nothing?" He had as a matter of fact said, "Damn Aziz"-- words that the servant understood, but was too polite to repeat. One can tip too much as well as too little, indeed the coin that buys the exact truth has not yet been minted. "Then I will write him a letter." He was offered the use of the house, but was too dignified to enter it. Paper and ink were brought on to the verandah. He began: "Dear Sir,--At your express command I have hastened as a subordinate should--" and then stopped. "Tell him I have called, that is sufficient," he said, tearing the protest up. "Here is my card. Call me a tonga." "Huzoor, all are at the club." "Then telephone for one down to the railway station." And since the man hastened to do this he said, "Enough, enough, I prefer to walk." He commandeered a match and lit a cigarette. These attentions, though purchased, soothed him. They would last as long as he had rupees, which is something. But to shake the dust of Anglo-India off his feet! To escape from the net and be back among manners and gestures that he knew! He began a walk, an unwonted exercise. He was an athletic little man, daintily put together, but really very strong. Nevertheless walking fatigued him, as it fatigues everyone in India except the new-corner. There is something hostile in that soil. It either yields, and the foot sinks into a depression, or else it is unexpectedly rigid and sharp, pressing stones or crystals against the tread. A series of these little surprises exhausts; and he was wearing pumps, a poor preparation for any country. At the edge of the civil station he turned into a mosque to rest. He had always liked this mosque. It was gracious, and the arrangement pleased him. The courtyard--entered through a ruined gate--contained an ablution tank of fresh clear water, which was always in motion, being indeed part of a conduit that supplied the city. The courtyard was paved with broken slabs. The covered part of the mosque was deeper than is usual; its effect was that of an English parish church whose side has been taken out. Where he sat, he looked into three arcades whose darkness was illuminated by a small hanging lamp and by the moon. The front--in full moonlight--had the appearance of marble, and the ninety-nine names of God on the frieze stood out black, as the frieze stood out white against the sky. The contest between this dualism and the contention of shadows within pleased Aziz, and he tried to symbolize the whole into some truth of religion or love. A mosque by winning his approval let loose his imagination. The temple of another creed, Hindu, Christian, or Greek, would have bored him and failed to awaken his sense of beauty. Here was Islam, his own country, more than a Faith, more than a battle-cry, more, much more . . . Islam, an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and his thoughts found their home. His seat was the low wall that bounded the courtyard on the left. The ground fell away beneath him towards the city, visible as a blur of trees, and in the stillness he heard many small sounds. On the right, over in the club, the English community contributed an amateur orchestra. Elsewhere some Hindus were drumming--he knew they were Hindus, because the rhythm was uncongenial to him,--and others were bewailing a corpse--he knew whose, having certified it in the afternoon. There were owls, the Punjab mail . . . and flowers smelt deliciously in the station-master's garden. But the mosque--that alone signified, and he returned to it from the complex appeal of the night, and decked it with meanings the builder had never intended. Some day he too would build a mosque, smaller than this but in perfect taste, so that all who passed by should experience the happiness he felt now. And near it, under a low dome, should be his tomb, with a Persian inscription:

Alas, without me for thousands of years The Rose will blossom and the Spring will bloom, But those who have secretly understood my heart-- They will approach and visit the grave where I lie.

He had seen the quatrain on the tomb of a Deccan king, and regarded it as profound philosophy--he always held pathos to be profound. The secret understanding of the heart! He repeated the phrase with tears in his eyes, and as he did so one of the pillars of the mosque seemed to quiver. It swayed in the gloom and detached itself. Belief in ghosts ran in his blood, but he sat firm. Another pillar moved, a third, and then an Englishwoman stepped out into the moonlight. Suddenly he was furiously angry and shouted: "Madam! Madam! Madam!" "Oh! Oh!" the woman gasped. "Madam, this is a mosque, you have no right here at all; you should have taken off your shoes; this is a holy place for Moslems." "I have taken them off." "You have?" "I left them at the entrance." "Then I ask your pardon." Still startled, the woman moved out, keeping the ablution-tank between them. He called after her, "I am truly sorry for speaking." "Yes, I was right, was I not? If I remove my shoes, I am allowed?" "Of course, but so few ladies take the trouble, especially if thinking no one is there to see." "That makes no difference. God is here." "Madam!" "Please let me go." "Oh, can I do you some service now or at any time?" "No, thank you, really none--good night." "May I know your name?" She was now in the shadow of the gateway, so that he could not see her face, but she saw his, and she said with a change of voice, "Mrs. Moore." "Mrs. --" Advancing, he found that she was old. A fabric bigger than the mosque fell to pieces, and he did not know whether he was glad or sorry. She was older than Hamidullah Begum, with a red face and white hair. Her voice had deceived him. "Mrs. Moore, I am afraid I startled you. I shall tell my community--our friends--about you. That God is here-very good, very fine indeed. I think you are newly arrived in India." "Yes--how did you know?" "By the way you address me. No, but can I call you a carriage?" "I

have only come from the club. They are doing a play that I have seen in London, and it was so hot." "What was the name of the play?" "_Cousin Kate_." "I think you ought not to walk at night alone, Mrs. Moore. There are bad characters about and leopards may come across from the Marabar Hills. Snakes also." She exclaimed; she had forgotten the snakes. "For example, a six-spot beetle," he continued. "You pick it up, it bites, you die." "But you walk about yourself." "Oh, I am used to it." "Used to snakes?" They both laughed. "I'm a doctor," he said. "Snakes don't dare bite me." They sat down side by side in the entrance, and slipped on their evening shoes. "Please may I ask you a question now? Why do you come to India at this time of year, just as the cold weather is ending?" "I intended to start earlier, but there was an unavoidable delay." "It will soon be so unhealthy for you! And why ever do you come to Chandrapore?" "To visit my son. He is the City Magistrate here." "Oh no, excuse me, that is quite impossible. Our City Magistrate's name is Mr. Heaslop. I know him intimately." "He's my son all the same," she said, smiling. "But, Mrs. Moore, how can he be?" "I was married twice." "Yes, now I see, and your first husband died." "He did, and so did my second husband." "Then we are in the same box," he said cryptically. "Then is the City Magistrate the entire of your family now?" "No, there are the younger ones--Ralph and Stella in England." "And the gentleman here, is he Ralph and Stella's half-brother?" "Quite right." "Mrs. Moore, this is all extremely strange, because like yourself I have also two sons and a daughter. Is not this the same box with a vengeance?" "What are their names? Not also Ronny, Ralph, and Stella, surely?" The suggestion delighted him. "No, indeed. How funny it sounds! Their names are quite different and will surprise you. Listen, please. I am about to tell you my children's names. The first is called Ahmed, the second is called Karim, the third--she is the eldest-- Jamila. Three children are enough. Do not you agree with me?" "I do." They were both silent for a little, thinking of their respective families. She sighed and rose to go. "Would you care to see over the Minto Hospital one morning?" he enquired. "I have nothing else to offer at Chandrapore." "Thank you, I have seen it already, or I should have liked to come with you very much." "I suppose the Civil Surgeon took you." "Yes, and Mrs. Callendar." His voice altered. "Ah! A very charming lady." "Possibly, when one knows her better." "What? What? You didn't like her?" "She was certainly intending to be kind, but I did not find her exactly charming." He burst out with: "She has just taken my tonga without my permission--do you call that being charming?--and Major Callendar interrupts me night after night from where I am dining with my friends and I go at once, breaking tip a most pleasant entertainment, and he is not there and not even a message. Is this charming, pray? But what does it matter? I can do nothing and he knows it. I am just a subordinate, my time is of no value, the verandah is good enough for an Indian, yes, yes, let him stand, and Mrs. Callendar takes my carriage and cuts me dead . . ." She listened. He was excited partly by his wrongs, but much more by the knowledge that someone sympathized with them. It was this that led him to repeat, exaggerate, contradict. She had proved her sympathy by criticizing her fellowcountrywoman to him, but even earlier he had known. The flame that not even beauty can nourish was springing up, and though his words were querulous his heart began to glow secretly. Presently it burst into speech. "You understand me, you know what others feel. Oh, if others resembled you!" Rather surprised, she replied: "I don't think I understand people very well. I only know whether I like or dislike them." "Then you are an Oriental." She accepted his escort back to the club, and said at the gate that she wished she was a member, so that she could have asked him in. "Indians are not allowed into the Chandrapore Club even as guests," he said simply. He did not expatiate on his wrongs now, being happy. As he strolled downhill beneath the lovely moon, and again saw the lovely mosque, he seemed to own the land as much as anyone owned it. What did it matter if a few flabby Hindus had preceded him there, and a few chilly English succeeded?

CHAPTER III

The third act of _Cousin Kate_ was well advanced by the time Mrs. Moore re-entered the club. Windows were barred, lest the servants should see their mem-sahibs acting, and the heat was consequently immense. One electric fan revolved like a wounded bird, another was out of order. Disinclined to return to the audience, she went into the billiard room, where she was greeted by "I want to see the _real_ India," and her appropriate life came back with a rush. This was Adela Quested, the queer, cautious girl whom Ronny had commissioned her to bring from England, and Ronny was her son, also cautious, whom Miss Quested would probably though not certainly marry, and she herself was an elderly lady. "I want to see it too, and I only wish we could. Apparently the Turtons will arrange something for next Tuesday." "It'll end in an elephant ride, it always does. Look at this evening. _Cousin Kate!_ Imagine, _Cousin Kate!_ But where have you been off to? Did you succeed in catching the moon in the Ganges?" The two ladies had happened, the night before, to see the moon's reflection in a distant channel of the stream. The water had drawn it out, so that it had seemed larger than the real moon, and brighter, which had pleased them. "I went to the mosque, but I did not catch the moon." "The angle would have altered--she rises later." "Later and later," yawned Mrs. Moore, who was tired after her walk. "Let me think--we don't see the other side of the moon out here, no." "Come, India's not as bad as all that," said a pleasant voice. "Other side of the earth, if you like, but we stick to the same old moon." Neither of them knew the speaker nor did they ever see him again. He passed with his friendly word through red-brick pillars into the darkness. "We aren't even seeing the other side of the world; that's our complaint," said Adela. Mrs. Moore agreed; she too was disappointed at the dullness of their new life. They had made such a romantic voyage across the Mediterranean and through the sands of Egypt to the harbour of Bombay, to find only a

gridiron of bungalows at the end of it. But she did not take the disappointment as seriously as Miss Quested, for the reason that she was forty years older, and had learnt that Life never gives us what we want at the moment that we consider appropriate. Adventures do occur, but not punctually. She said again that she hoped that something interesting would be arranged for next Tuesday. "Have a drink," said another pleasant voice. "Mrs. Moore--Miss Quested--have a drink, have two drinks." They knew who it was this time--the Collector, Mr. Turton, with whom they had dined. Like themselves, he had found the atmosphere of _Cousin Kate_ too hot. Ronny, he told them, was stage-managing in place of Major Callendar, whom some native subordinate or other had let down, and doing it very well; then he turned to Ronny's other merits, and in quiet, decisive tones said much that was flattering. It wasn't that the young man was particularly good at the games or the lingo, or that he had much notion of the Law, but--apparently a large but--Ronny was dignified. Mrs. Moore was surprised to learn this, dignity not being a quality with which any mother credits her son. Miss Quested learnt it with anxiety, for she had not decided whether she liked dignified men. She tried indeed to discuss this point with Mr. Turton, but he silenced her with a good-humoured motion of his hand, and continued what he had come to say. "The long and the short of it is Heaslop's a sahib; he's the type we want, he's one of us," and another civilian who was leaning over the billiard table said, "Hear, hear!" The matter was thus placed beyond doubt, and the Collector passed on, for other duties called him. Meanwhile the performance ended, and the amateur orchestra played the National Anthem. Conversation and billiards stopped, faces stiffened. It was the Anthem of the Army of Occupation. it reminded every member of the club that he or she was British and in exile. It produced a little sentiment and a useful accession of willpower. The meagre tune, the curt series of demands on Jehovah, fused into a prayer unknown in England, and though they perceived neither Royalty nor Deity they did perceive something, they were strengthened to resist another day. Then they poured out, offering one another drinks. "Adela, have a drink; mother, a drink." They refused--they were weary of drinks--and Miss Quested, who always said exactly what was in her mind, announced anew that she was desirous of seeing the real India. Ronny was in high spirits. The request struck him as comic, and he called out to another passer-by: "Fielding! how's one to see the real India?" "Try seeing Indians," the man answered, and vanished. "Who was that?" "Our schoolmaster--Government College." "As if one could avoid seeing them," sighed Mrs. Lesley. "I've avoided," said Miss Quested. "Excepting my own servant, I've scarcely spoken to an Indian since landing." "Oh, lucky you." "But I want to see them." She became the centre of an amused group of ladies. One said, "Wanting to see Indians! How new that sounds!" Another, "Natives! why, fancy!" A third, more serious, said, "Let me explain. Natives don't respect one any the more after meeting one, you see." "That occurs after so many meetings." But the lady, entirely stupid and friendly, continued: "What I mean is, I was a nurse before my marriage, and came across them a great deal, so I know. I really do know the truth about Indians. A most unsuitable position for any Englishwoman--I was a nurse in a Native State. One's only hope was to hold sternly aloof." "Even from one's patients?" "Why, the kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die," said Mrs. Callendar. "How if he went to heaven?" asked Mrs. Moore, with a gentle but crooked smile. "He can go where he likes as long as he doesn't come near me. They give me the creeps." "As a matter of fact I have thought what you were saying about heaven, and that is why I am against Missionaries," said the lady who had been a nurse. "I am all for Chaplains, but all against Missionaries. Let me explain." But before she could do so, the Collector intervened. "Do you really want to meet the Aryan Brother, Miss Quested? That can be easily fixed up. I didn't realize he'd amuse you." He thought a moment. "You can practically see any type you like. Take your choice. I know the Government people and the landowners, Heaslop here can get hold of the barrister crew, while if you want to specialize on education, we can come down on Fielding." "I'm tired of seeing picturesque figures pass before me as a frieze," the girl explained. "It was wonderful when we landed, but that superficial glamour soon goes." Her impressions were of no interest to the Collector; he was only concerned to give her a good time. Would she like a Bridge Party? He explained to her what that was--not the game, but a party to bridge the gulf between East and West; the expression was his own invention, and amused all who heard it. "I only want those Indians whom you come across socially--as your friends." "Well, we don't come across them socially," he said, laughing. "They're full of all the virtues, but we don't, and it's now eleven-thirty, and too late to go into the reasons." "Miss Quested, what a name!" remarked Mrs. Turton to her husband as they drove away. She had not taken to the new young lady, thinking her ungracious and cranky. She trusted that she hadn't been brought out to marry nice little Heaslop, though it looked like it. Her husband agreed with her in his heart, but he never spoke against an Englishwoman if he could avoid doing so, and he only said that Miss Quested naturally made mistakes. He added: "India does wonders for the judgment, especially during the hot weather; it has even done wonders for Fielding." Mrs. Turton closed her eyes at this name and remarked that Mr. Fielding wasn't pukka, and had better marry Miss Quested, for she wasn't pukka. Then they reached their bungalow, low and enormous, the oldest and most uncomfortable bungalow in the civil station, with a sunk soup plate of a lawn, and they had one drink more, this time of barley water, and went to bed. Their withdrawal from the club had broken up the evening, which, like all gatherings, had an official tinge. A community that bows the knee to a Viceroy and believes that the divinity that hedges a king can be transplanted, must feel some reverence for any viceregal substitute. At Chandrapore the Turtons were little gods; soon they would retire to some suburban villa, and die exiled from glory. "It's decent of the Burra Sahib," chattered Ronny, much gratified at the civility that had been shown to his guests. "Do you know he's never given a Bridge Party before? Coming on top of the dinner too! I wish I could have arranged something myself,

but when you know the natives better you'll realize it's easier for the Burra Sahib than for me. They know him--they know be can't be fooled--I'm still fresh comparatively. No one can even begin to think of knowing this country until he has been in it twenty years.--Hullo, the mater! Here's your cloak.--Well: for an example of the mistakes one makes. Soon after I came out I asked one of the Pleaders to have a smoke with me-only a cigarette, mind. I found afterwards that he had sent touts all over the bazaar to announce the fact--told all the litigants, 'Oh, you'd better come to my Vakil Mahmoud Ali--he's in with the City Magistrate.' Ever since then I've dropped on him in Court as hard as I could. It's taught me a lesson, and I hope him." "Isn't the lesson that you should invite all the Pleaders to have a smoke with you?" "Perhaps, but time's limited and the flesh weak. I prefer my smoke at the club amongst my own sort, I'm afraid." "Why not ask the Pleaders to the club?" Miss Quested persisted. "Not allowed." He was pleasant and patient, and evidently understood why she did not understand. He implied that he had once been as she, though not for long. Going to the verandah, he called firmly to the moon. His sais answered, and without lowering his head, he ordered his trap to be brought round. Mrs. Moore, whom the club had stupefied, woke up outside. She watched the moon, whose radiance stained with primrose the purple of the surrounding sky. In England the moon had seemed dead and alien; here she was caught in the shawl of night together with earth and all the other stars. A sudden sense of unity, of kinship with the heavenly bodies, passed into the old woman and out, like water through a tank, leaving a strange freshness behind. She did not dislike _Cousin Kate_ or the National Anthem, but their note had died into a new one, just as cocktails and cigars had died into invisible flowers. When the mosque, long and domeless, gleamed at the turn of the road, she exclaimed, "Oh, yes--that's where I got to--that's where I've been." "Been there when?" asked her son. "Between the acts." "But, mother, you can't do that sort of thing." "Can't mother?" she replied. "No, really not in this country. It's not done. There's the danger from snakes for one thing. They are apt to lie out in the evening." "Ah yes, so the young man there said." "This sounds very romantic," said Miss Quested, who was exceedingly fond of Mrs. Moore, and was glad she should have had this little escapade. "You meet a young man in a mosque, and then never let me know!" "I was going to tell you, Adela, but something changed the conversation and I forgot. My memory grows deplorable." "Was he nice?" She paused, then said emphatically: "Very nice." "Who was he?" Ronny enquired. "A doctor. I don't know his name." "A doctor? I know of no young doctor in Chandrapore. How odd! What was he like?" "Rather small, with a little moustache and quick eyes. He called out to me when I was in the dark part of the mosque--about my shoes. That was how we began talking. He was afraid I had them on, but I remembered luckily. He told me about his children, and then we walked back to the club. He knows you well." "I wish you had pointed him out to me. I can't make out who he is." "He didn't come into the club. He said he wasn't allowed to." Thereupon the truth struck him, and he cried, "Oh, good gracious! Not a Mohammedan? Why ever didn't you tell me you'd been talking to a native? I was going all wrong." "A Mohammedan! How perfectly magnificent!" exclaimed Miss Quested. "Ronny, isn't that like your mother? While we talk about seeing the real India, she goes and sees it, and then forgets she's seen it." But Ronny was ruffled. From his mother's description he had thought the doctor might be young Muggins from over the Ganges, and had brought out all the comradely emotions. What a mix-up! Why hadn't she indicated by the tone of her voice that she was talking about an Indian? Scratchy and dictatorial, he began to question her. "He called to you in the mosque, did he? How? Impudently? What was he doing there himself at that time of night?--No, it's not their prayer time."-- This in answer to a suggestion of Miss Quested's, who showed the keenest interest. "So he called to you over your shoes. Then it was impudence. It's an old trick. I wish you had had them on." "I think it was impudence, but I don't know about a trick," said Mrs. Moore. "His nerves were all on edge--I could tell from his voice. As soon as I answered he altered." "You oughtn't to have answered." "Now look here," said the logical girl, "wouldn't you expect a Mohammedan to answer if you asked him to take off his hat in church?" "It's different, it's different; you don't understand." "I know I don't, and I want to. What is the difference, please?" He wished she wouldn't interfere. His mother did not signify--she was just a globe-trotter, a temporary escort, who could retire to England with what impressions she chose. But Adela, who meditated spending her life in the country, was a more serious matter; it would be tiresome if she started crooked over the native question. Pulling up the mare, he said, "There's your Ganges." Their attention was diverted. Below them a radiance had suddenly appeared. It belonged neither to water nor moonlight, but stood like a luminous sheaf upon the fields of darkness. He told them that it was where the new sand-bank was forming, and that the dark ravelled bit at the top was the sand, and that the dead bodies floated down that way from Benares, or would if the crocodiles let them. "It's not much of a dead body that gets down to Chandrapore." "Crocodiles down in it too, how terrible!" his mother murmured. The young people glanced at each other and smiled; it amused them when the old lady got these gentle creeps, and harmony was restored between them consequently. She continued: "What a terrible river! what a wonderful river! "and sighed. The radiance was already altering, whether through shifting of the moon or of the sand; soon the bright sheaf would be gone, and a circlet, itself to alter, be burnished upon the streaming void. The women discussed whether they would wait for the change or not, while the silence broke into patches of unquietness and the mare shivered. On her account they did not wait, but drove on to the City Magistrate's bungalow, where Miss Quested went to bed, and Mrs. Moore had a short interview with her son. He wanted to enquire about the Mohammedan doctor in the mosque. It was his duty to report suspicious characters and conceivably it was some disreputable hakirn who had prowled up from the bazaar. When she told him that it was someone connected with the Minto Hospital, he was relieved, and said

that the fellow's name must be Aziz, and that he was quite all right, nothing against him at all. "Aziz! what a charming name!" "So you and he had a talk. Did you gather he was well disposed?" Ignorant of the force of this question, she replied, "Yes, quite, after the first moment." "I meant, generally. Did he seem to tolerate us--the brutal conqueror, the sundried bureaucrat, that sort of thing?" "Oh, yes, I think so, except the Callendars--he doesn't care for the Callendars at all." "Oh. So he told you that, did he? The Major will be interested. I wonder what was the aim of the remark." "Ronny, Ronny! you're never going to pass it on to Major Callendar?" "Yes, rather. I must, in fact!" "But, my dear boy--" "If the Major heard I was disliked by any native subordinate of mine, I should expect him to pass it on to me." "But, my dear boy--a private conversation!" "Nothing's private in India. Aziz knew that when he spoke out, so don't you worry. He had some motive in what he said. My personal belief is that the remark wasn't true." "How not true?" "He abused the Major in order to impress you." "I don't know what you mean, dear." "It's the educated native's latest dodge. They used to cringe, but the younger generation believe in a show of manly independence. They think it will pay better with the itinerant M.P. But whether the native swaggers or cringes, there's always something behind every remark he makes, always something, and if nothing else he's trying to increase his izzat--in plain knglo-Saxon, to score. Of course there are exceptions." "You never used to judge people like this at home." "India isn't home," he retorted, rather rudely, but in order to silence her he had been using phrases and arguments that he had picked up from older officials, and he did not feel quite sure of himself. When he said "of course there are exceptions" he was quoting Mr. Turton, while "increasing the izzat" was Major Callendar's own. The phrases worked and were in current use at the club, but she was rather clever at detecting the first from the second hand, and might press him for definite examples. She only said, "I can't deny that what you say sounds very sensible, but you really must not hand on to Major Callendar anything I have told you about Doctor Aziz." He felt disloyal to his caste, but he promised, adding, "In return please don't talk about Aziz to Adela." "Not talk about him? Why?" "There you go again, mother--I really can't explain every thing. I don't want Adela to be worried, that's the fact; she'll begin wondering whether we treat the natives properly, and all that sort of nonsense." "But she came out to be worried--that's exactly why she's here. She discussed it all on the boat. We had a long talk when we went on shore at Aden. She knows you in play, as she put it, but not in work, and she felt she must come and look round, before she decided--and before you decided. She is very, very fair-minded." "I know," he said dejectedly. The note of anxiety in his voice made her feel that he was still a little boy, who must have what he liked, so she promised to do as he wished, and they kissed good night. He had not forbidden her to think about Aziz, however, and she did this when she retired to her room. In the light of her son's comment she reconsidered the scene at the mosque, to see whose impression was correct. Yes, it could be worked into quite an unpleasant scene. The doctor had begun by bullying her, had said Mrs. Callendar was nice, and then--finding the ground safe--had changed; he had alternately whined over his grievances and patronized her, had run a dozen ways in a single sentence, had been unreliable, inquisitive, vain. Yes, it was all true, but how false as a summary of the man; the essential life of him had been slain. Going to hang up her cloak, she found that the tip of the peg was occupied by a small wasp. She had known this wasp or his relatives by day; they were not as English wasps, but had long yellow legs which hung down behind when they flew. Perhaps he mistook the peg for a branch--no Indian animal has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside a house as out; it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses trees, houses trees. There he clung, asleep, while jackals in the plain bayed their desires and mingled with the percussion of drums. "Pretty dear," said Mrs. Moore to the wasp. He did not wake, but her voice floated out, to swell the night's uneasiness.

CHAPTER IV

The Collector kept his word. Next day he issued invitation cards to numerous Indian gentlemen in the neighbourhood, stating that he would be at home in the garden of the club between the hours of five and seven on the following Tuesday, also that Mrs. Turton would be glad to receive any ladies of their families who were out of purdah. His action caused much excitement and was discussed in several worlds. "It is owing to orders from the L.G.," was Mahmoud Ali's explanation. "Turton would never do this unless compelled. Those high officials are different--they sympathize, the Viceroy sympathizes, they would have us treated properly. But they come too seldom and live too far away. Meanwhile--" "It is easy to sympathize at a distance," said an old gentleman with a beard. "I value more the kind word that is spoken close to my ear. Mr. Turton has spoken it, from whatever cause. He speaks, we hear. I do not see why we need discuss it further." Quotations followed from the Koran. "We have not all your sweet nature, Nawab Bahadur, nor your learning." "The Lieutenant-Governor may be my very good friend, but I give him no trouble.--How do you do, Nawab Bahadur?--Quite well, thank you, Sir Gilbert; how are you?--And all is over. But I can be a thorn in Mr. Turton's flesh, and if he asks me I accept the invitation. I shall come in from Dilkusha specially, though I have to postpone other business." "You will make yourself chip," suddenly said a little black man. There was a stir of disapproval. Who was this ill-bred upstart, that he should criticize the leading Mohammedan landowner of the district? Mahmoud Ali, though sharing his opinion, felt bound to oppose it. "Mr. Ram Chand!" he said, swaying forward stiffly with his hands on his hips. "Mr. Mahmoud Ali!" "Mr. Ram Chand, the Nawab Bahadur can decide what is cheap without our valuation, I think." "I do not expect I shall make myself cheap," said the

Nawab Bahadur to Mr. Ram Chand, speaking very pleasantly, for he was aware that the man had been impolite and he desired to shield him from the consequences. It had passed through his mind to reply, "I expect I shall make myself cheap," but he rejected this as the less courteous alternative. "I do not see why we should make ourselves cheap. I do not see why we should. The invitation is worded very graciously." Feeling that he could not further decrease the social gulf between himself and his auditors, he sent his elegant grandson, who was in attendance on him, to fetch his car. When it came, he repeated all that he had said before, though at greater length, ending up with "Till Tuesday, then, gentlemen all, when I hope we may meet in the flower gardens of the club." This opinion carried great weight. The Nawab Bahadur was a big proprietor and a philanthropist, a man of benevolence and decision. His character among all the communities in the province stood high. He was a straightforward enemy and a staunch friend, and his hospitality was proverbial. "Give, do not lend; after death who will thank you?" was his favourite remark. He held it a disgrace to die rich. When such a man was prepared to motor twenty-five miles to shake the Collector's hand, the entertainment took another aspect. For he was not like some eminent men, who give out that they will come, and then fail at the last moment, leaving the small fry floundering. If he said he would come, he would come, he would never deceive his supporters. The gentlemen whom he had lectured now urged one another to attend the party, although convinced at heart that his advice was unsound. He had spoken in the little room near the Courts where the pleaders waited for clients; clients, waiting for pleaders, sat in the dust outside. These had not received a card from Mr. Turton. And there were circles even beyond these--people who wore nothing but a loincloth, people who wore not even that, and spent their lives in knocking two sticks together before a scarlet doll-- humanity grading and drifting beyond the educated vision, until no earthly invitation can embrace it. All invitations must proceed from heaven perhaps; perhaps it is futile for men to initiate their own unity, they do but widen the gulfs between them by the attempt. So at all events thought old Mr. Graysford and young Mr. Sorley, the devoted missionaries who lived out beyond the slaughterhouses, always travelled third on the railways, and never came up to the club. In our Father's house are many mansions, they taught, and there alone will the incompatible multitudes of mankind be welcomed and soothed. Not one shall be turned away by the servants on that verandah, be he black or white, not one shall be kept standing who approaches with a loving heart. And why should the divine hospitality cease here? Consider, with all reverence, the monkeys. May there not be a mansion for the monkeys also? Old Mr. Graysford said No, but young Mr. Sorley, who was advanced, said Yes; he saw no reason why monkeys should not have their collateral share of bliss, and he had sympathetic discussions about them with his Hindu friends. And the jackals? Jackals were indeed less to Mr. Sorley's mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well embrace all mammals. And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps, and was apt to change the conversation. And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud? and the bacteria inside Mr. Sorley? No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing.

CHAPTER V

The Bridge Party was not a success--at least it was not what Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested were accustomed to consider a successful party. They arrived early, since it was given in their honour, but most of the Indian guests had arrived even earlier, and stood massed at the farther side of the tennis lawns, doing nothing. "It is only just five," said Mrs. Turton. "My husband will be up from his office in a moment and start the thing. I have no idea what we have to do. It's the first time we've ever given a party like this at the club. Mr. Heaslop, when I'm dead and gone will you give parties like this? It's enough to make the old type of Burra Sahib turn in his grave." Ronny laughed deferentially. "You wanted something not picturesque and we've provided it," he remarked to Miss Quested. "What do you think of the Aryan Brother in a topi and spats?" Neither she nor his mother answered. They were gazing rather sadly over the tennis lawn. No, it was not picturesque; the East, abandoning its secular magnificence, was descending into a valley whose farther side no man can see. "The great point to remember is that no one who's here matters; those who matter don't come. Isn't that so, Mrs. Turton?" "Absolutely true," said the great lady, leaning back. She was "saving herself up," as she called it--not for anything that would happen that afternoon or even that week, but for some vague future occasion when a high official might come along and tax her social strength. Most of her public appearances were marked by this air of reserve. Assured of her approbation, Ronny continued: "The educated Indians will be no good to us if there's a row, it's simply not worth while conciliating them, that's why they don't matter. Most of the people you see are seditious at heart, and the rest 'ld run squealing. The cultivator--he's another story. The Pathan--he's a man if you like. But these people--don't imagine they're India." He pointed to the dusky line beyond the court, and here and there it flashed a pince-nez or shuffled a shoe, as if aware that he was despising it. European costume had lighted like a leprosy. Few had yielded entirely, but none were untouched. There was a silence when he had finished speaking, on both sides of the court; at least, more ladies joined the English group, but their words seemed to die as soon as uttered. Some kites hovered overhead, impartial, over the kites passed the mass of a vulture, and with an impartiality exceeding all, the sky, not deeply coloured but translucent, poured light from its whole circumference. It seemed unlikely that the series stopped here. Beyond the sky must not there be something that overarches all the skies, more impartial even than they? Beyond which again . . . They spoke of _Cousin Kate_. They had tried to reproduce their own attitude to life

upon the stage, and to dress up as the middle-class English people they actually were. Next year they would do _Quality Street_ or _The Yeomen of the Guard_. Save for this annual incursion, they left literature alone. The men had no time for it, the women did nothing that they could not share with the men. Their ignorance of the Arts was notable, and they lost no opportunity of proclaiming it to one another; it was the Public School attitude; flourishing more vigorously than it can yet hope to do in England. If Indians were shop, the Arts were bad form, and Ronny had repressed his mother when she enquired after his viola; a viola was almost a demerit, and certainly not the sort of instrument one mentioned in public. She noticed now how tolerant and conventional his judgments had become; when they had seen _Cousin Kate_ in London together in the past, he had scorned it; now he pretended that it was a good play, in order to hurt nobody's feelings. An "unkind notice" had appeared in the local paper, "the sort of thing no white man could have written," as Mrs. Lesley said. The play was praised, to be sure, and so were the stage management and the performance as a whole, but the notice contained the following sentence: "Miss Derek, though she charmingly looked her part, lacked the necessary experience, and occasionally forgot her words." This tiny breath of genuine criticism had given deep offence, not indeed to Miss Derek, who was as hard as nails, but to her friends. Miss Derek did not belong to Chandrapore. She was stopping for a fortnight with the McBrydes, the police people, and she had been so good as to fill up a gap in the cast at the last moment. A nice impression of local hospitality she would carry away with here "To work, Mary, to work," cried the Collector, touching his wife on the shoulder with a switch. Mrs. Turton got up awkwardly. "What do you want me to do? Oh, those purdah women! I never thought any would come. Oh dear!" A little group of Indian ladies had been gathering in a third quarter of the grounds, near a rustic summer-house in which the more timid of them had already taken refuge. The rest stood with their backs to the company and their faces pressed into a bank of shrubs. At a little distance stood their male relatives, watching the venture. The sight was significant: an island bared by the turning tide, and bound to grow. "I consider they ought to come over to me." "Come along, Mary, get it over." "I refuse to shake hands with any of the men, unless it has to be the Nawab Bahadur." "Whom have we so far?" He glanced along the line. "H'm! h'm! much as one expected. We know why he's here, I think--over that contract, and he wants to get the right side of me for Mohurram, and he's the astrologer who wants to dodge the municipal building regulations, and he's that Parsi, and he's--Hullo! there he goes-- smash into our hollyhocks. Pulled the left rein when he meant the right. All as usual." "They ought never to have been allowed to drive in; it's so bad for them," said Mrs. Turton, who had at last begun her progress to the summer-house, accompanied by Mrs. Moore, Miss Quested, and a terrier. "Why they come at all I don't know. They hate it as much as we do. Talk to Mrs. McBryde. Her husband made her give purdah parties until she struck." "This isn't a purdah party," corrected Miss Quested. "Oh, really," was the haughty rejoinder. "Do kindly tell us who these ladies are," asked Mrs. Moore. "You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis, and they're on an equality." Advancing, she shook hands with the group and said a few words of welcome in Urdu. She had learnt the lingo, but only to speak to her servants, so she knew none of the politer forms and of the verbs only the imperative mood. As soon as her speech was over, she enquired of her companions, "Is that what you wanted?" "Please tell these ladies that I wish we could speak their language, but we have only just come to their country." "Perhaps we speak yours a little," one of the ladies said. "Why, fancy, she understands!" said Mrs. Turton. "Eastbourne, Piccadilly, High Park Corner," said another of the ladies. "Oh yes, they're English-speaking." "But now we can talk: how delightful!" cried Adela, her face lighting up. "She knows Paris also," called one of the onlookers. "They pass Paris on the way, no doubt," said Mrs. Turton, as if she was describing the movements of migratory birds. Her manner had grown more distant since she had discovered that some of the group was Westernized, and might apply her own standards to her. "The shorter lady, she is my wife, she is Mrs. Bhattacharya," the onlooker explained. "The taller lady, she is my sister, she is Mrs. Das." The shorter and the taller ladies both adjusted their saris, and smiled. There was a curious uncertainty about their gestures, as if they sought for a new formula which neither East nor West could provide. When Mrs. Bhattacharya's husband spoke, she turned away from him, but she did not mind seeing the other men. Indeed all the ladies were uncertain, cowering, recovering, giggling, making tiny gestures of atonement or despair at all that was said, and alternately fondling the terrier or shrinking from him. Miss Quested now had her desired opportunity; friendly Indians were before her, and she tried to make them talk, but she failed, she strove in vain against the echoing walls of their civility. Whatever she said produced a murmur of deprecation, varying into a murmur of concern when she dropped her pocket-handkerchief. She tried doing nothing, to see what that produced, and they too did nothing. Mrs. Moore was equally unsuccessful. Mrs. Turton waited for them with a detached expression; she had known what nonsense it all was from the first. When they took their leave, Mrs. Moore had an impulse, and said to Mrs. Bhattacharya, whose face she liked, "I wonder whether you would allow us to call on you some day." "When?" she replied, inclining charmingly. "Whenever is convenient." "All days are convenient." "Thursday . . ." "Most certainly." "We shall enjoy it greatly, it would be a real pleasure. What about the time?" "All hours." "Tell us which you would prefer. We're quite strangers to your country; we don't know when you have visitors," said Miss Quested. Mrs. Bhattacharya seemed not to know either. Her gesture implied that she had known, since Thursdays began, that English ladies would come to see her on one of them, and so always stayed in. Everything pleased her, nothing surprised. She added, "We leave for Calcutta to-day." "Oh, do you?" said Adela, not at first seeing the implication. Then she cried, "Oh, but if you do we shall find you gone." Mrs.

Bhattacharya did not dispute it. But her husband called from the distance, "Yes, yes, you come to us Thursday." "But you'll be in Calcutta." "No, no, we shall not." He said something swiftly to his wife in Bengali. "We expect you Thursday." "Thursday . . ." the woman echoed. "You can't have done such a dreadful thing as to put off going for our sake?" exclaimed Mrs. Moore. "No, of course not, we are not such people." He was laughing. "I believe that you have. Oh, please--it distresses me beyond words." Everyone was laughing now, but with no suggestion that they had blundered. A shapeless discussion occurred, during which Mrs. Turton retired, smiling to herself. The upshot was that they were to come Thursday, but early in the morning, so as to wreck the Bhattacharya plans as little as possible, and Mr. Bhattacharya would send his carriage to fetch them, with servants to point out the way. Did he know where they lived? Yes, of course he knew, he knew everything; and he laughed again. They left among a flutter of compliments and smiles, and three ladies, who had hitherto taken no part in the reception, suddenly shot out of the summer-house like exquisitely coloured swallows, and salaamed them. Meanwhile the Collector had been going his rounds. He made pleasant remarks and a few jokes, which were applauded lustily, but he knew something to the discredit of nearly every one of his guests, and was consequently perfunctory. When they had not cheated, it was bhang, women, or worse, and even the desirables wanted to get something out of him. He believed that a "Bridge Party" did good rather than harm, or he would not have given one, but he was under no illusions, and at the proper moment he retired to the English side of the lawn. The impressions he left behind him were various. Many of the guests, especially the humbler and less Anglicized, were genuinely grateful. To be addressed by so high an official was a permanent asset. They did not mind how long they stood, or how little happened, and when seven o'clock struck, they had to be turned out. Others were grateful with more intelligence. The Nawab Bahadur, indifferent for himself and for the distinction with which he was greeted, was moved by the mere kindness that must have prompted the invitation. He knew the difficulties. Hamidullah also thought that the Collector had played up well. But others, such as Mahmoud Ali, were cynical; they were firmly convinced that Turton had been made to give the party by his official superiors and was all the time consumed with impotent rage, and they infected some who were inclined to a healthier view. Yet even Mahmoud Ali was glad he had come. Shrines are fascinating, especially when rarely opened, and it amused him to note the ritual of the English club, and to caricature it afterwards to his friends. After Mr. Turton, the official who did his duty best was Mr. Fielding, the Principal of the little Government College. He knew little of the district and less against the inhabitants, so he was in a less cynical state of mind. Athletic and cheerful, he romped about, making numerous mistakes which the parents of his pupils tried to cover up, for he was popular among them. When the moment for refreshments came, he did not move back to the English side, but burnt his mouth with gram. He talked to anyone and he ate anything. Amid much that was alien, he learnt that the two new ladies from England had been a great success, and that their politeness in wishing to be Mrs. Bhattacharya's guests had pleased not only her but all Indians who heard of it. It pleased Mr. Fielding also. He scarcely knew the two new ladies, still he decided to tell them what pleasure they had given by their friendliness. He found the younger of them alone. She was looking through a nick in the cactus hedge at the distant Marabar Hills, which had crept near, as was their custom at sunset; if the sunset had lasted long enough, they would have reached the town, but it was swift, being tropical. He gave her his information, and she was so much pleased and thanked him so heartily that he asked her and the other lady to tea. "I'd like to come very much indeed, and so would Mrs. Moore, I know." "I'm rather a hermit, you know." "Much the best thing to be in this place." "Owing to my work and so on, I don't get up much to the club." "I know, I know, and we never get down from it. I envy you being with Indians." "Do you care to meet one or two?" "Very, very much indeed; it's what I long for. This party to-day makes me so angry and miserable. I think my countrymen out here must be mad. Fancy inviting guests and not treating them properly! You and Mr. Turton and perhaps Mr. McBryde are the only people who showed any common politeness. The rest make me perfectly ashamed, and it's got worse and worse." It had. The Englishmen had intended to play up better, but had been prevented from doing so by their women folk, whom they had to attend, provide with tea, advise about dogs, etc. When tennis began, the barrier grew impenetrable. It had been hoped to have some sets between East and West, but this was forgotten, and the courts were monopolized by the usual club couples. Fielding resented it too, but did not say so to the girl, for he found something theoretical in her outburst. Did she care about Indian music? he enquired; there was an old professor down at the College, who sang. "Oh, just what we wanted to hear. And do you know Doctor Aziz?" "I know all about him. I don't know him. Would you like him asked too?" "Mrs. Moore says he is so nice." "Very well, Miss Quested. Will Thursday suit you?" "Indeed it will, and that morning we go to this Indian lady's. All the nice things are coming Thursday." "I won't ask the City Magistrate to bring you. I know he'll be busy at that time." "Yes, Ronny is always hard-worked," she replied, contemplating the hills. How lovely they suddenly were! But she couldn't touch them. In front, like a shutter, fell a vision of her married life. She and Ronny would look into the club like this every evening, then drive home to dress; they would see the Lesleys and the Callendars and the Turtons and the Burtons, and invite them and be invited by them, while the true India slid by unnoticed. Colour would remain--the pageant of birds in the early morning, brown bodies, white turbans, idols whose flesh was scarlet or blue--and movement would remain as long as there were crowds in the bazaar and bathers in the tanks. Perched up on the seat of a dogcart, she would see them. But the force that lies behind colour and movement would escape her even more effectually than it did now. She would see India always as a frieze, never as a spirit, and she assumed that it was a spirit of which

Mrs. Moore had had a glimpse. And sure enough they did drive away from the club in a few minutes, and they did dress, and to dinner came Miss Derek and the McBrydes, and the menu was: Julienne soup full of bullety bottled peas, pseudo-cottage bread, fish full of branching bones, pretending to be plaice, more bottled peas with the cutlets, trifle, sardines on toast: the menu of Anglo-India. A dish might be added or subtracted as one rose or fell in the official scale, the peas might rattle less or more, the sardines and the vermouth be imported by a different firm, but the tradition remained; the food of exiles, cooked by servants who did not understand it. Adela thought of the young men and women who had come out before her, P. & O. full after P. & O. full, and had been set down to the same food and the same ideas, and been snubbed in the same good-humoured way until they kept to the accredited themes and began to snub others. "I should never get like that," she thought, for she was young herself; all the same she knew that she had come up against something that was both insidious and tough, and against which she needed allies. She must gather around her at Chandrapore a few people who felt as she did, and she was glad to have met Mr. Fielding and the Indian lady with the unpronounceable name. Here at all events was a nucleus; she should know much better where she stood in the course of the next two days. Miss Derek--she companioned a Maharani in a remote Native State. She was genial and gay and made them all laugh about her leave, which she had taken because she felt she deserved it, not because the Maharani said she might go. Now she wanted to take the Maharajah's motor-car as well; it had gone to a Chiefs' Conference at Delhi, and she had a great scheme for burgling it at the junction as it came back in the train. She was also very funny about the Bridge Party--indeed she regarded the entire peninsula as a comic opera. "If one couldn't see the laughable side of these people one 'Id be done for," said Miss Derek. Mrs. McBryde--it was she who had been the nurse--ceased not to exclaim, "Oh, Nancy, how topping! Oh, Nancy, how killing! I wish I could look at things like that." Mr. McBryde did not speak much; he seemed nice. When the guests had gone, and Adela gone to bed, there was another interview between mother and son. He wanted her advice and support--while resenting interference. "Does Adela talk to you much?" he began. "I'm so driven with work, I don't see her as much as I hoped, but I hope she finds things comfortable." "Adela and I talk mostly about India. Dear, since you mention it, you're quite right--you ought to be more alone with her than you are." "Yes, perhaps, but then people'ld gossip." "Well, they must gossip sometime! Let them gossip." "People are so odd out here, and it's not like home--one's always facing the footlights, as the Burra Sahib said. Take a silly little example: when Adela went out to the boundary of the club compound, and Fielding followed her. I saw Mrs. Callendar notice it. They notice everything, until they're perfectly sure you're their sort." "I don't think Adela'll ever be quite their sort--she's much too individual." "I know, that's so remarkable about her," he said thoughtfully. Mrs. Moore thought him rather absurd. Accustomed to the privacy of London, she could not realize that India, seemingly so mysterious, contains none, and that consequently the conventions have greater force. "I suppose nothing's on her mind," he continued. "Ask her, ask her yourself, my dear boy." "Probably she's heard tales of the heat, but of course I should pack her off to the Hills every April--I'm not one to keep a wife grilling in the Plains." "Oh, it wouldn't be the weather." "There's nothing in India but the weather, my dear mother; it's the Alpha and Omega of the whole affair." "Yes, as Mrs. McBryde was saying, but it's much more the Anglo-Indians themselves who are likely to get on Adela's nerves. She doesn't think they behave pleasantly to Indians, you see." "What did I tell you?" he exclaimed, losing his gentle manner. "I knew it last week. Oh, how like a woman to worry over a side-issue!" She forgot about Adela in her surprise. "A side-issue, a side-issue?" she repeated. "How can it be that?" "We're not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly!" "What do you mean?" "What I say. We're out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them's my sentiments. India isn't a drawingroom." "Your sentiments are those of a god," she said quietly, but it was his manner rather than his sentiments that annoyed her. Trying to recover his temper, he said, "India likes gods." "And Englishmen like posing as gods." "There's no point in all this. Here we are, and we're going to stop, and the country's got to put up with us, gods or no gods. Oh, look here," he broke out, rather pathetically, "what do you and Adela want me to do? Go against my class, against all the people I respect and admire out here? Lose such power as I have for doing good in this country because my behaviour isn't pleasant? You neither of you understand what work is, or you 'ld never talk such eyewash. I hate talking like this, but one must occasionally. It's morbidly sensitive to go on as Adela and you do. I noticed you both at the club to-day--after the Burra Sahib had been at all that trouble to amuse you. I am out here to work, mind, to hold this wretched country by force. I'm not a missionary or a Labour Member or a vague sentimental sympathetic literary man. I'm just a servant of the Government; it's the profession you wanted me to choose myself, and that's that. We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do." He spoke sincerely. Every day he worked hard in the court trying to decide which of two untrue accounts was the less untrue, trying to dispense justice fearlessly, to protect the weak against the less weak, the incoherent against the plausible, surrounded by lies and flattery. That morning he had convicted a railway clerk of overcharging pilgrims for their tickets, and a Pathan of attempted rape. He expected no gratitude, no recognition for this, and both clerk and Pathan might appeal, bribe their witnesses more effectually in the interval, and get their sentences reversed. It was his duty. But he did expect sympathy from his own people, and except from new-corners he obtained it. He did think he ought not to be worried about "Bridge Parties" when the day's work was over and he wanted to play tennis with his equals or rest his legs upon a long chair. He spoke sincerely, but she could have wished with less gusto. How Ronny revelled in the drawbacks of his situation! How he did rub it in that he was not in India to behave pleasantly, and derived positive satisfaction

therefrom! He reminded her of his public-schooldays. The traces of young-man humanitarianism had sloughed off, and he talked like an intelligent and embittered boy. His words without his voice might have impressed her, but when she heard the self-satisfied lilt of them, when she saw the mouth moving so complacently and competently beneath the little red nose, she felt, quite illogically, that this was not the last word on India. One touch of regret--not the canny substitute but the true regret from the heart--would have made him a different man, and the British Empire a different institution. "I'm going to argue, and indeed dictate," she said, clinking her rings. "The English are out here to be pleasant." "How do you make that out, mother?" he asked, speaking gently again, for he was ashamed of his irritability. "Because India is part of the earth. And God has put us on the earth in order to be pleasant to each other. God . . . is . . . love." She hesitated, seeing how much he disliked the argument, hut something made her go on. "God has put us on earth to love our neighbours and to show it, and He is omnipresent, even in India, to see how we are succeeding." He looked gloomy, and a little anxious. He knew this religious strain in her, and that it was a symptom of bad health; there had been much of it when his stepfather died. He thought, "She is certainly ageing, and I ought not to be vexed with anything she says." "The desire to behave pleasantly satisfies God . . . The sincere if impotent desire wips His blessing. I think everyone fails, but there are so many kinds of failure. Good will and more good will and more good will. Though I speak with the tongues of . . ." He waited until she had done, and then said gently, "I quite see that. I suppose I ought to get off to my files now, and you'll be going to bed." "I suppose so, I suppose so." They did not part for a few minutes, but the conversation had become unreal since Christianity had entered it. Ronny approved of religion as long as it endorsed the National Anthem, but he objected when it attempted to influence his life. Then he would say in respectful yet decided tones, "I don't think it does to talk about these things, every fellow has to work out his own religion," and any fellow who heard him muttered, "Hear!" Mrs. Moore felt that she had made a mistake in mentioning God, but she found him increasingly difficult to avoid as she grew older, and he had been constantly in her thoughts since she entered India, though oddly enough he satisfied her less. She must needs pronounce his name frequently, as the greatest she knew, yet she had never found it less efficacious. Outside the arch there seemed always an arch, beyond the remotest echo a silence. And she regretted afterwards that she had not kept to the real serious subject that had caused her to visit India--namely, the relationship between Ronny and Adela. Would they, or would they not, succeed in becoming engaged to be married?

CHAPTER VI

Aziz had not gone to the Bridge Party. Immediately after his meeting with Mrs. Moore he was diverted to other matters. Several surgical cases came in, and kept him busy. He ceased to be either outcaste or poet, and became the medical student, very gay, and full of details of operations which he poured into the shrinking ears of his friends. His profession fascinated him at times, but he required it to be exciting, and it was his hand, not his mind, that was scientific. The knife he loved and used skilfully, and he also liked pumping in the latest serums. But the boredom of r�me and hygiene repelled him, and after inoculating a man for enteric, he would go away and drink unfiltered water himself. "What can you expect from the fellow?" said dour Major Callendar. "No grits, no guts." But in his heart he knew that if Aziz and not he had operated last year on Mrs. Graysford's appendix, the old lady would probably have lived. And this did not dispose him any better towards his subordinate. There was a row the morning after the mosque--they were always having rows. The Major, who had been up half the night, wanted damn well to know why Aziz had not come promptly when summoned. "Sir, excuse me, I did. I mounted my bike, and it bust in front of the Cow Hospital. So I had to find a tonga." "Bust in front of the Cow Hospital, did it? And how did you come to be there?" "I beg your pardon?" "Oh Lord, oh Lord! When I live here "--he kicked the gravel--" and you live there--not ten minutes from me--and the Cow Hospital is right ever so far away the other side of you--_there_--then how did you come to be passing the Cow Hospital on the way to me? Now do some work for a change." He strode away in a temper, without waiting for the excuse, which as far as it went was a sound one: the Cow Hospital was in a straight line between Hamidullah's house and his own, so Aziz had naturally passed it. He never realized that the educated Indians visited one another constantly, and were weaving, however painfully, a new social fabric. Caste "or something of the sort" would prevent them. He only knew that no one ever told him the truth, although he had been in the country for twenty years. Aziz watched him go with amusement. When his spirits were up he felt that the English are a comic institution, and he enjoyed being misunderstood by them. But it was an amusement of the emotions and nerves, which an accident or the passage of time might destroy; it was apart from the fundamental gaiety that he reached when he was with those whom he trusted. A disobliging simile involving Mrs. Callendar occurred to his fancy. "I must tell that to Mahmoud Ali, it'll make him laugh," he thought. Then he got to work. He was competent and indispensable, and he knew it. The simile passed from his mind while he exercised his professional skill. During these pleasant and busy days, he heard vaguely that the Collector was giving a party, and that the Nawab Bahadur said everyone ought to go to it. His fellowassistant, Doctor Panna Lal, was in ecstasies at the prospect, and was urgent that they should attend it together in his new tum-tum. The arrangement suited them both. Aziz was spared the indignity of a bicycle or the expense of hiring, while Dr. Panna Lal, who was timid and elderly, secured someone who could manage his horse. He could manage it himself, but only just, and he was afraid of the motors and of the unknown turn

into the club grounds. "Disaster may come," he said politely, "but we shall at all events get there safe, even if we do not get back." And with more logic: "It will, I think, create a good impression should two doctors arrive at the same time." But when the time came, Aziz was seized with a revulsion, and determined not to go. For one thing his spell of work, lately concluded, left him independent and healthy. For another, the day chanced to fall on the anniversary of his wife's death. She had died soon after he had fallen in love with her; he had not loved her at first. Touched by Western feeling, he disliked union with a woman whom he had never seen; moreover, when he did see her, she disappointed him, and he begat his first child in mere animality. The change began after its birth. He was won by her love for him, by a loyalty that implied something more than submission, and by her efforts to educate herself against that lifting of the purdah that would come in the next generation if not in theirs. She was intelligent, yet had old-fashioned grace. Gradually he lost the feeling that his relatives had chosen wrongly for him. Sensuous enjoyment--well, even if he had had it, it would have dulled in a year, and he had gained something instead, which seemed to increase the longer they lived together. She became the mother of a son . . . and in giving him a second son she died. Then he realized what he had lost, and that no woman could ever take her place; a friend would come nearer to her than another woman. She had gone, there was no one like her, and what is that uniqueness but love? He amused himself, he forgot her at times: but at other times he felt that she had sent all the beauty and joy of the world into Paradise, and he meditated suicide. Would he meet her beyond the tomb? Is there such a meetingplace? Though orthodox, he did not know. God's unity was indubitable and indubitably announced, but on all other points he wavered like the average Christian; his belief in the life to come would pale to a hope, vanish, reappear, all in a single sentence or a dozen heart-beats, so that the corpuscles of his blood rather than he seemed to decide which opinion he should hold, and for how long. It was so with all his opinions. Nothing stayed, nothing passed that did not return; the circulation was ceaseless and kept him young, and he mourned his wife the more sincerely because he mourned her seldom. It would have been simpler to tell Dr. Lal that he had changed his mind about the party, but until the last minute he did not know that he had changed it; indeed, he didn't change it, it changed itself. Unconquerable aversion welled. Mrs. Callendar, Mrs. Lesley--no, he couldn't stand them in his sorrow: they would guess it-- for he dowered the British matron with strange insight-- and would delight in torturing him, they would mock him to their husbands. When he should have been ready, he stood at the Post Office, writing a telegram to his children, and found on his return that Dr. Lal had called for him, and gone on. Well, let him go on, as befitted the coarseness of his nature. For his own part, he would commune with the dead. And unlocking a drawer, he took out his wife's photograph. He gazed at it, and tears spouted from his eyes. He thought, "How unhappy I am!" But because he really was unhappy, another emotion soon mingled with his self-pity: he desired to remember his wife and could not. Why could he remember people whom he did not love? They were always so vivid to him, whereas the more he looked at this photograph, the less he saw. She had eluded him thus, ever since they had carried her to her tomb. He had known that she would pass from his hands and eyes, but had thought she could live in his mind, not realizing that the very fact that we have loved the dead increases their unreality, and that the more passionately we invoke them the further they recede. A piece of brown cardboard and three children--that was all that was left of his wife. It was unbearable, and he thought again, "How unhappy I am!" and became happier. He had breathed for an instant the mortal air that surrounds Orientals and all men, and he drew back from it with a gasp, for he was young. "Never, never shall I get over this," he told himself. "Most certainly my career is a failure, and my sons will be badly brought up." Since it was certain, he strove to avert it, and looked at some notes he had made on a case at the hospital. Perhaps some day a rich person might require this particular operation, and he gain a large sum. The notes interesting him on their own account, he locked the photograph up again. Its moment was over, and he did not think about his wife any more. After tea his spirits improved, and he went round to see Hamidullah. Hamidullah had gone to the party, but his pony had not, so Aziz borrowed it, also his friend's riding breeches and polo mallet. He repaired to the Maidan. It was deserted except at its rim, where some bazaar youths were training. Training for what? They would have found it hard to say, but the word had got into the air. Round they ran, weedy and knock-kneed--the local physique was wretched--with an expression on their faces not so much of determination as of a deterinination to be determined. "Maharajah, salaam," he called for a joke. The youths stopped and laughed. He advised them not to exert themselves. They promised they would not, and ran on. Riding into the middle, he began to knock the ball about. He could not play, but his pony could, and he set himself to learn, free from all human tension. He forgot the whole damned business of living as he scurried over the brown platter of the Maidan, with the evening wind on his forehead, and the encircling trees soothing his eyes. The ball shot away towards a stray subaltern who was also practising; he hit it back to Aziz and called, "Send it along again." "All right." The new-corner had some notion of what to do, but his horse had none, and forces were equal. Concentrated on the ball, they somehow became fond of one another, and smiled when they drew rein to rest. Aziz liked soldiers--they either accepted you or swore at you, which was preferable to the civilian's hauteur--and the subaltern liked anyone who could ride. "Often play?" he asked. "Never." "Let's have another chukker." As he hit, his horse bucked and off he went, cried, "Oh God!" and jumped on again. "Don't you ever fall off?" "Plenty." "Not you." They reined up again, the fire of good fellowship in their eyes. But it cooled with their bodies, for athletics can only raise a temporary glow. Nationality was returning, but before it could exert its poison they parted, saluting each other. "If only they were all like that," each thought. Now it was sunset. A

few of his co-religionists had come to the Maidan, and were praying with their faces towards Mecca. A Brahminy Bull walked towards them, and Aziz, though disinclined to pray himself, did not see why they should be bothered with the clumsy and idolatrous animal. He gave it a tap with his polo mallet. As he did so, a voice from the road hailed him: it was Dr. Panna Lal, returning in high distress from the Collector's party. "Dr. Aziz, Dr. Aziz, where you been? I waited ten full minutes' time at your house, then I went." "I am so awfully sorry--I was compelled to go to the Post Office." One of his own circle would have accepted this as meaning that he had changed his mind, an event too common to merit censure. But Dr. Lal, being of low extraction, was not sure whether an insult had not been intended, and he was further annoyed because Aziz had buffeted the Brahminy Bull. "Post Office? Do you not send your servants?" he said. "I have so few--my scale is very small." "Your servant spoke to me. I saw your servant." "But, Dr. Lal, consider. How could I send my servant when you were coming: you come, we go, my house is left alone, my servant comes back perhaps, and all my portable property has been carried away by bad characters in the meantime. Would you have that? The cook is deaf--I can never count on my cook--and the boy is only a little boy. Never, never do I and Hassan leave the house at the same time together. It is my fixed rule." He said all this and much more out of civility, to save Dr. Lal's face. It was not offered as truth and should not have been criticized as such. But the other demolished it--an easy and ignoble task. "Even if this so, what prevents leaving a chit saying where you go?" and so on. Aziz detested ill breeding, and made his pony caper. "Farther away, or mine will start out of sympathy," he wailed, revealing the true source of his irritation. "It has been so rough and wild this afternoon. It spoiled some most valuable blossoms in the club garden, and had to be dragged back by four men. English ladies and gentlemen looking on, and the Collector Sahib himself taking a note. But, Dr. Aziz, I'll not take up your valuable time. This will not interest you, who have so many engagements and telegrams. I am just a poor old doctor who thought right to pay my respects when I was asked and where I was asked. Your absence, I may remark, drew commentaries." "They can damn well comment." "It is fine to be young. Damn well! Oh, very fine. Damn whom?" "I go or not as I please." "Yet you promise me, and then fabricate this tale of a telegram. Go forward, Dapple." They went, and Aziz had a wild desire to make an enemy for life. He could do it so easily by galloping near them. He did it. Dapple bolted. He thundered back on to the Maidan. The glory of his play with the subaltern remained for a little, he galloped and swooped till he poured with sweat, and until he returned the pony to Hamidullah's stable he felt the equal of any man. Once on his feet, he had creeping fears. Was he in bad odour with the powers that be? Had he offended the Collector by absenting himself? Dr. Panna La! was a person of no importance, yet was it wise to have quarrelled even with him? The complexion of his mind turned from human to political. He thought no longer, "Can I get on with people?" but "Are they stronger than I?" breathing the prevalent miasma. At his home a chit was awaiting him, bearing the Government stamp. It lay on his table like a high explosive, which at a touch might blow his flimsy bungalow to bits. He was going to be cashiered because he had not turned up at the party. When he opened the note, it proved to be quite different; an invitation from Mr. Fielding, the Principal of Government College, asking him to come to tea the day after to-morrow. His spirits revived with violence. They would have revived in any case, for he possessed a soul that could suffer but not stifle, and led a steady life beneath his mutability. But this invitation gave him particular joy, because Fielding had asked him to tea a month ago, and he had forgotten about it-never answered, never gone, just forgotten. And here came a second invitation, without a rebuke or even an allusion to his slip. Here was true courtesy--the civil deed that shows the good heart--and snatching up his pen he wrote an affectionate reply, and hurried back for news to Hamidullah's. For he had never met the Principal, and believed that the one serious gap in his life was going to be filled. He longed to know everything about the splendid fellow--his salary, preferences, antecedents, how best one might please him. But Hamidullah was still out, and Mahmoud Ali, who was in, would only make silly rude jokes about the party.

CHAPTER VII

This Mr. Fielding had been caught by India late. He was over forty when he entered that oddest portal, the Victoria Terminus at Bombay, and--having bribed a European ticket inspector--took his luggage into the compartment of his first tropical train. The journey remained in his mind as significant. Of his two carriage companions one was a youth, fresh to the East like himself, the other a seasoned Anglo-Indian of his own age. A gulf divided him from either; he had seen too many cities and men to be the first or to become the second. New impressions crowded on him, but they were not the orthodox new impressions; the past conditioned them, and so it was with his mistakes. To regard an Indian as if he were an Italian is not, for instance, a common error, nor perhaps a fatal one, and Fielding often attempted analogies between this peninsula and that other, smaller and more exquisitely shaped, that stretches into the classic waters of the Mediterranean. His career, though scholastic, was varied, and had included going to the bad and repenting thereafter. By now he was a hard-bitten, good-tempered, intelligent fellow on the verge of middle age, with a belief in education. He did not mind whom he taught; public schoolboys, mental defectives and policemen, had all come his way, and he had no objection to adding Indians. Through the influence of friends, he was nominated Principal of the little college at Chandrapore, liked it, and assumed he was a success. He did succeed with his pupils, but the gulf between himself and his countrymen, which he had noticed in the train, widened distressingly. He

could not at first see what was wrong. He was not unpatriotic, he always got on with Englishmen in England, all his best friends were English, so why was it not the same out here? Outwardly of the large shaggy type, with sprawling limbs and blue eyes, he appeared to inspire confidence until he spoke. Then something in his manner puzzled people and failed to allay the distrust which his profession naturally inspired. There needs must be this evil of brains in India, but woe to him through whom they are increased! The feeling grew that Mr. Fielding was a disruptive force, and rightly, for ideas are fatal to caste, and he used ideas by that most potent method--interchange. Neither a missionary nor a student, he was happiest in the give-and-take of a private conversation. The world, he believed, is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence-- a creed ill suited to Chandrapore, but he had come out too late to lose it. He had no racial feeling--not because he was superior to his brother civilians, but because he had matured in a different atmosphere, where the herdinstinct does not flourish. The remark that did him most harm at the club was a silly aside to the effect that the socalled white races are really pinko-grey. He only said this to be cheery, he did not realize that "white" has no more to do with a colour than "God save the King" with a god, and that it is the height of impropriety to consider what it does connote. The pinko-grey male whom he addressed was subtly scandalized; his sense of insecurity was awoken, and he communicated it to the rest of the herd. Still, the men tolerated him for the sake of his good heart and strong body; it was their wives who decided that he was not a sahib really. They disliked him. He took no notice of them, and this, which would have passed without comment in feminist England, did him harm in a community where the male is expected to be lively and helpful. Mr. Fielding never advised one about dogs or horses, or dined, or paid his midday calls, or decorated trees for one's children at Christmas, and though he came to the club, it was only to get his tennis or billiards, and to go. This was true. He had discovered that it is possible to keep in with Indians and Englishmen, but that he who would also keep in with Englishwomen must drop the Indians. The two wouldn't combine. Useless to blame either party, useless to blame them for blaming one another. It just was so, and one had to choose. Most Englishmen preferred their own kinswomen, who, coming out in increasing numbers, made life on the home pattern yearly more possible. He had found it convenient and pleasant to associate with Indians and he must pay the price. As a rule no Englishwoman entered the College except for official functions, and if he invited Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested to tea, it was because they were new-comers who would view everything with an equal if superficial eye, and would not turn on a special voice when speaking to his other guests. The College itself had been slapped down by the Public Works Department, but its grounds included an ancient garden and a garden-house, and here he lived for much of the year. He was dressing after a bath when Dr. Aziz was announced. Lifting up his voice, he shouted from the bedroom, "Please make yourself at home." The remark was unpremeditated, like most of his actions; it was what he felt inclined to say. To Aziz it had a very definite meanng. "May I really, Mr. Fielding? It's very good of you," he called back; "I like unconventional behaviour so extremely." His spirits flared up, he glanced round the living-room. Some luxury in it, but no order--nothing to intimidate poor Indians. It was also a very beautiful room, opening into the garden through three high arches of wood. "The fact is I have long wanted to meet you," he continued. "I have heard so much about your warm heart from the Nawab Bahadur. But where is one to meet in a wretched hole like Chandrapore?" He came close up to the door. "When I was greener here, I'll tell you what. I used to wish you to fall ill so that we could meet that way." They laughed, and encouraged by his success he began to improvise. "I said to myself, How does Mr. Fielding look this morning? Perhaps pale. And the Civil Surgeon is pale too, he will not be able to attend upon him when the shivering commences. I should have been sent for instead. Then we would have had jolly talks, for you are a celebrated student of Persian poetry." "You know me by sight, then." "Of course, of course. You know me?" "I know you very well by name." "I have been here such a short time, and always in the bazaar. No wonder you have never seen me, and I wonder you know my name. I say, Mr. Fielding?" "Yes?" "Guess what I look like before you come out. That will be a kind of game." "You're five feet nine inches high," said Fielding, surmising this much through the ground glass of the bedroom door. "Jolly good. What next? Have I not a venerable white beard?" " Blast! "Anything wrong?" "I've stamped on my last collar stud." "Take mine, take mine." "Have you a spare one?" "Yes, yes, one minute." "Not if you're wearing it yourself." "No, no, one in my pocket." Stepping aside, so that his outline might vanish, he wrenched off his collar, and pulled out of his shirt the back stud, a gold stud, which was part of a set that his brother-in-law had brought him from Europe. " Here it is," he cried. "Come in with it if you don't mind the unconventionality." "One minute again." Replacing his collar, he prayed that it would not spring up at the back during tea. Fielding's bearer, who was helping him to dress, opened the door for him. "Many thanks." They shook hands smiling. He began to look round, as he would have with any old friend. Fielding was not surprised at the rapidity of their intimacy. With so emotional a people it was apt to come at once or never, and he and Aziz, having heard only good of each other, could afford to dispense with preliminaries. "But I always thought that Englishmen kept their rooms so tidy. It seems that this is not so. I need not be so ashamed." He sat down gaily on the bed; then, forgetting himself entirely, drew up his legs and folded them under him. "Everything ranged coldly on shelves was what _I_ thought.--I say, Mr. Fielding, is the stud going to go in?" "I hae ma doots." "What's that last sentence, please? Will you teach me some new words and so improve my English?" Fielding doubted whether "everything ranged coldly on shelves" could be improved. He was often struck with the liveliness with which the younger generation handled a foreign tongue. They altered the idiom, but they could say whatever they

wanted to say quickly; there were none of the babuisms ascribed to them up at the club. But then the club moved slowly; it still declared that few Mohammedans and no Hindus would eat at an Englishman's table, and that all Indian ladies were in impenetrable purdah. Individually it knew better; as a club it declined to change. "Let me put in your stud. I see . . . the shirt back's hole is rather small and to rip it wider a pity." "Why in hell does one wear collars at all?" grumbled Fielding as he bent his neck. "We wear them to pass the Police." "What's that?" "If I'm biking in English dress--starch collar, hat with ditch--they take no notice. When I wear a fez, they cry, 'Your lamp's out!' Lord Curzon did not consider this when he urged natives of India to retain their picturesque costumes.--Hooray! Stud's gone in.--Sometimes I shut my eyes and dream I have splendid clothes again and am riding into battle behind Alamgir. Mr. Fielding, must not India have been beautiful then, with the Mogul Empire at its height and Alamgir reigning at Delhi upon the Peacock Throne?" "Two ladies are coming to tea to meet you--I think you know them." "Meet me? I know no ladies." "Not Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested?" "Oh yes--I remember." The romance at the mosque had sunk out of his consciousness as soon as it was over. "An excessively aged lady; but will you please repeat the name of her companion?" "Miss Quested." "Just as you wish." He was disappointed that other guests were coming, for he preferred to be alone with his new friend. "You can talk to Miss Quested about the Peacock Throne if you like--she's artistic, they say." "Is she a Post Impressionist?" "Post Impressionism, indeed! Come along to tea. This world is getting too much for me altogether." Aziz was offended. The remark suggested that he, an obscure Indian, had no right to have heard of Post Impressionism--a privilege reserved for the Ruling Race, that. He said stiffly, "I do not consider Mrs. Moore my friend, I only met her accidentally in my mosque," and was adding "a single meeting is too short to make a friend," but before he could finish the sentence the stiffness vanished from it, because he felt Fielding's fundamental good will. His own went out to it, and grappled beneath the shifting tides of emotion which can alone bear the voyager to an anchorage but may also carry him across it on to the rocks. He was safe really--as safe as the shore-dweller who can only understand stability and supposes that every ship must be wrecked, and he had sensations the shore-dweller cannot know. Indeed, he was sensitive rather than responsive. In every remark he found a meaning, but not always the true meaning, and his life though vivid was largely a dream. Fielding, for instance, had not meant that Indians are obscure, but that Post Impressionism is; a gulf divided his remark from Mrs. Turton's "Why, they speak English," but to Aziz the two sounded alike. Fielding saw that something had gone wrong, and equally that it had come right, but he didn't fidget, being an optimist where personal relations were concerned, and their talk rattled on as before. "Besides the ladies I am expecting one of my assistants--Narayan Godbole." "Oho, the Deccani Brahman!" "He wants the past back too, but not precisely Alamgir." "I should think not. Do you know what Deccani Brahmans say? That England conquered India from them--from them, mind, and not from the Moguls. Is not that like their cheek? They have even bribed it to appear in text-books, for they are so subtle and immensely rich. Professor Godbole must be quite unlike all other Deccani Brahmans from all I can hear say. A most sincere chap." "Why don't you fellows run a club in Chandrapore, Aziz?" "Perhaps--some day . . . just now I see Mrs. Moore and--what's her name--coming." How fortunate that it was an "unconventional" party, where formalities are ruled out! On this basis Aziz found the English ladies easy to talk to, he treated them like men. Beauty would have troubled him, for it entails rules of its own, but Mrs. Moore was so old and Miss Quested so plain that he was spared this anxiety. Adela's angular body and the freckles on her face were terrible defects in his eyes, and he wondered how God could have been so unkind to any female form. His attitude towards her remained entirely straightforward in consequence. "I want to ask you something, Dr. Aziz," she began. "I heard from Mrs. Moore how helpful you were to her in the mosque, and how interesting. She learnt more about India in those few minutes' talk with you than in the three weeks since we landed." "Oh, please do not mention a little thing like that. Is there anything else I may tell you about my country?" "I want you to explain a disappointment we had this morning; it must be some point of Indian etiquette." "There honestly is none," he replied. "We are by nature a most informal people." "I am afraid we must have made some blunder and given offence," said Mrs. Moore. "That is even more impossible. But may I know the facts?" "An Indian lady and gentleman were to send their carriage for us this morning at nine. It has never come. We waited and waited and waited; we can't think what happened." "Some misunderstanding," said Fielding, seeing at once that it was the type of incident that had better not be cleared up. "Oh no, it wasn't that," Miss Quested persisted. "They even gave up going to Calcutta to entertain us. We must have made some stupid blunder, we both feel sure." "I wouldn't worry about that." "Exactly what Mr. Heaslop tells me," she retorted, reddening a little. "If one doesn't worry, how's one to understand?" The host was inclined to change the subject, but Aziz took it up warmly, and on learning fragments of the delinquents' name pronounced that they were Hindus. "Slack Hindus--they have no idea of society; I know them very well because of a doctor at the hospital. Such a slack, unpunctual fellow! It is as well you did not go to their house, for it would give you a wrong idea of India. Nothing sanitary. I think for my own part they grew ashamed of their house and that is why they did not send." "That's a notion," said the other man. "I do so hate mysteries," Adela announced. "We English do." "I dislike them not because I'm English, but from my own personal point of view," she corrected. "I like mysteries but I rather dislike muddles," said Mrs. Moore. "A mystery is a muddle." "Oh, do you think so, Mr. Fielding?" "A mystery is only a high-sounding term for a muddle. No advantage in stirring it up, in either case. Aziz and I know well that India's a muddle." "India's-- Oh, what an alarming idea!" "There'll be no muddle when you come to see me," said Aziz, rather out of his depth. "Mrs. Moore and everyone--I invite you all--oh, please." The old lady

accepted: she still thought the young doctor excessively nice; moreover, a new feeling, half languor, half excitement, bade her turn down any fresh path. Miss Quested accepted out of adventure. She also liked Aziz, and believed that when she knew him better he would unlock his country for her. His invitation gratified her, and she asked him for his address. Aziz thought of his bungalow with horror. It was a detestable shanty near a low bazaar. There was practically only one room in it, and that infested with small black flies. "Oh, but we will talk of something else now," he exclaimed. "I wish I lived here. See this beautiful room! Let us admire it together for a little. See those curves at the bottom of the arches. What delicacy! It is the architecture of Question and Answer. Mrs. Moore, you are in India; I am not joking." The room inspired him. It was an audience hall built in the eighteenth century for some high official, and though of wood had reminded Fielding of the Loggia de' Lanzi at Florence. Little rooms, now Europeanized, clung to it on either side, but the central hall was unpapered and unglassed, and the air of the garden poured in freely. One sat in public--on exhibition, as it were--in full view of the gardeners who were screaming at the birds and of the man who rented the tank for the cultivation of water chestnut. Fielding let the mango trees too--there was no knowing who might not come in--and his servants sat on his steps night and day to discourage thieves. Beautiful certainly, and the Englishman had not spoilt it, whereas Aziz in an occidental moment would have hung Maude Goodmans on the walls. Yet there was no doubt to whom the room really belonged. . . . "I am doing justice here. A poor widow who has been robbed comes along and I give her fifty rupees, to another a hundred, and so on and so on. I should like that." Mrs. Moore smiled, thinking of the modern method as exemplified in her son. "Rupees don't last for ever, I'm afraid," she said. "Mine would. God would give me more when he saw I gave. Always be giving, like the Nawab Bahadur. My father was the same, that is why he died poor." And pointing about the room he peopled it with clerks and officials, all benevolent because they lived long ago. "So we would sit giving for ever--on a carpet instead of chairs, that is the chief change between now and then, but I think we would never punish anyone." The ladies agreed. "Poor criminal, give him another chance. It only makes a man worse to go to prison and be corrupted." His face grew very tender--the tenderness of one incapable of administration, and unable to grasp that if the poor criminal is let off he will again rob the poor widow. He was tender to everyone except a few family enemies whom he did not consider human: on these he desired revenge. He was even tender to the English; he knew at the bottom of his heart that they could not help being so cold and odd and circulating like an ice stream through his land. "We punish no one, no one," he repeated, "and in the evening we will give a great banquet with a nautch and lovely girls shall shine on every side of the tank with fireworks in their hands, and all shall be feasting and happiness until the next day, when there shall be justice as before--fifty rupees, a hundred, a thousand--till peace comes. Ah, why didn't we live in that time ?--But are you admiring Mr. Fielding's house? Do look how the pillars are painted blue, and the verandah's pavilions--what do you call them ?--that are above us inside are blue also. Look at the carving on the pavilions. Think of the hours it took. Their little roofs are curved to imitate bamboo. So pretty--and the bamboos waving by the tank outside. Mrs. Moore! Mrs. Moore!" "Well?" she said, laughing. "You remember the water by our mosque? It comes down and fills this tank--a skilful arrangement of the Emperors. They stopped here going down into Bengal. They loved water. Wherever they went they created fountains, gardens, hammams. I was telling Mr. Fielding I would give anything to serve them." He was wrong about the water, which no Emperor, however skilful, can cause to gravitate uphill; a depression of some depth together with the whole of Chandrapore lay between the mosque and Fielding's house. Ronny would have pulled him up, Turton would have wanted to pull him up, but restrained himself. Fielding did not even want to pull him up; he had dulled his craving for verbal truth and cared chiefly for truth of mood. As for Miss Quested, she accepted everything Aziz said as true verbally. In her ignorance, she regarded him as "India," and never surmised that his outlook was limited and his method inaccurate, and that no one is India. He was now much excited, chattering away hard, and even saying damn when he got mixed up in his sentences. He told them of his profession, and of the operations he had witnessed and performed, and he went into details that scared Mrs. Moore, though Miss Quested mistook them for proofs of his broad-mindedness; she had heard such talk at home in advanced academic circles, deliberately free. She supposed him to be emancipated as well as reliable, and placed him on a pinnacle which he could not retain. He was high enough for the moment, to be sure, but not on any pinnacle. Wings bore him up, and flagging would deposit him. The arrival of Professor Godbole quieted him somewhat, but it remained his afternoon. The Brahman, polite and enigmatic, did not impede his eloquence, and even applauded it. He took his tea at a little distance from the outcasts, from a low table placed slightly behind him, to which he stretched back, and as it were encountered food by accident; all feigned indifference to Professor Godbole's tea. He was elderly and wizen with a grey moustache and grey-blue eyes, and his complexion was as fair as a European's. He wore a turban that looked like pale purple macaroni, coat, waistcoat, dhoti, socks with clocks. The clocks matched the turban, and his whole appearance suggested harmony--as if he had reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical, and could never be discomposed. The ladies were interested in him, and hoped that he would supplement Dr. Aziz by saying something about religion. But he only ate--ate and ate, smiling, never letting his eyes catch sight of his hand. Leaving the Mogul Emperors, Aziz turned to topics that could distress no one. He described the ripening of the mangoes, and how in his boyhood he used to run out in the Rains to a big mango grove belonging to an uncle and gorge there. "Then back with water streaming over you and perhaps rather a pain inside. But I did not mind. All my friends were paining with me. We have a proverb in Urdu:

'What does unhappiness matter when we are all unhappy together?' which comes in conveniently after mangoes. Miss Quested, do wait for mangoes. Why not settle altogether in India?" "I'm afraid I can't do that," said Adela. She made the remark without thinking what it meant. To her, as to the three men, it seemed in key with the rest of the conversation, and not for several minutes--indeed, not for half an hour--did she realize that it was an important remark, and ought to have been made in the first place to Ronny. "Visitors like you are too rare." "They are indeed," said Professor Godbole. "Such affability is seldom seen. But what can we offer to detain them? " "Mangoes, mangoes." They laughed. "Even mangoes can be got in England now," put in Fielding. "They ship them in ice-cold rooms. You can make India in England apparently, just as you can make England in India." "Frightfully expensive in both cases," said the girl. "I suppose so." "And nasty." But the host wouldn't allow the conversation to take this heavy turn. He turned to the old lady, who looked flustered and put out--he could not imagine why--and asked about her own plans. She replied that she should like to see over the College. Everyone immediately rose, with the exception of Professor Godbole, who was finishing a banana. "Don't you come too, Adela; you dislike institutions." "Yes, that is so," said Miss Quested, and sat down again. Aziz hesitated. His audience was splitting up. The more familiar half was going, but the more attentive remained. Reflecting that it was an "unconventional" afternoon, he stopped. Talk went on as before. Could one offer the visitors unripe mangoes in a fool? "I speak now as a doctor: no." Then the old man said, "But I will send you up a few healthy sweets. I will give myself that pleasure." "Miss Quested, Professor Godbole's sweets are delicious," said Aziz sadly, for he wanted to send sweets too and had no wife to cook them. "They will give you a real Indian treat. Ah, in my poor position I can give you nothing." "I don't know why you say that, when you have so kindly asked us to your house." He thought again of his bungalow with horror. Good heavens, the stupid girl had taken him at his word! What was he to do? "Yes, all that is settled," he cried. "I invite you all to see me in the Marabar Caves." "I shall be delighted." "Oh, that is a most magnificent entertainment compared to my poor sweets. But has not Miss Quested visited our caves already?" "No. I've not even heard of them." "Not heard of them?" both cried. "The Marabar Caves in the Marabar Hills?" "We hear nothing interesting up at the club. Only tennis and ridiculous gossip." The old man was silent, perhaps feeling that it was unseemly of her to criticize her race, perhaps fearing that if he agreed she would report him for disloyalty. But the young man uttered a rapid "I know." "Then tell me everything you will, or I shall never understand India. Are they the hills I sometimes see in the evening? What are these caves?" Aziz undertook to explain, but it presently appeared that he had never visited the caves himself--had always been "meaning" to go, but work or private business had prevented him, and they were so far. Professor Godbole chaffed him pleasantly. "My dear young sir, the pot and the kettle! Have you ever heard of that useful proverb?" "Are they large caves?" she asked. "No, not large." "Do describe them, Professor Godbole." "It will be a great honour." He drew up his chair and an expression of tension came over his face. Taking the cigarette box, she offered to him and to Aziz, and lit up herself. After an impressive pause he said: "There is an entrance in the rock which you enter, and through the entrance is the cave." "Something like the caves at Elephanta?" "Oh no, not at all; at Elephanta there are sculptures of Siva and Parvati. There are no sculptures at Marabar." "They are immensely holy, no doubt," said Aziz, to help on the narrative. "Oh no, oh no." "Still, they are ornamented in some way." "Oh no." "Well, why are they so famous? We all talk of the famous Marabar Caves. Perhaps that is our empty brag." "No, I should not quite say that." "Describe them to this lady, then." "It will be a great pleasure." He forewent the pleasure, and Aziz realized that he was keeping back something about the caves. He realized because he often suffered from similar inhibitions himself. Sometimes, to the exasperation of Major Callendar, he would pass over the one relevant fact in a position, to dwell on the hundred irrelevant. The Major accused him of disingenuousness, and was roughly right, but only roughly. It was rather that a power he couldn't control capriciously silenced his mind. Godbole had been silenced now; no doubt not willingly, he was concealing something. Handled subtly, he might regain control and announce that the Marabar Caves were--full of stalactites, perhaps; Aziz led up to this, but they weren't. The dialogue remained light and friendly, and Adela had no conception of its underdrift. She did not know that the comparatively simple mind of the Mohammedan was encountering Ancient Night. Aziz played a thrilling game. He was handling a human toy that refused to work--he knew that much. If it worked, neither he nor Professor Godbole would be the least advantaged, but the attempt enthralled him and was akin to abstract thought. On he chattered, defeated at every move by an opponent who would not even admit that a move had been made, and further than ever from discovering what, if anything, was extraordinary about the Marabar Caves. Into this Ronny dropped. With an annoyance he took no trouble to conceal, he called from the garden: "What's happened to Fielding? Where's my mother?" "Good evening!" she replied coolly. "I want you and mother at once. There's to be polo." "I thought there was to he no polo." "Everything's altered. Some soldier men have come in. Come along and I'll tell you about it." "Your mother will return shortly, sir," said Professor Godbole, who had risen with deference. "There is but little to see at our poor college." Ronny took no notice, but continued to address his remarks to Adela; he had hurried away from his work to take her to see the polo, because he thought it would give her pleasure. He did not mean to be rude to the two men, but the only link he could be conscious of with an Indian was the official, and neither happened to be his subordinate. As private individuals he forgot them. Unfortunately Aziz was in no mood to be forgotten. He would not give up the secure and intimate note of the last hour. He had not risen with Godbole, and now, offensively friendly, called from his seat, "Come along up and join us, Mr. Heaslop; sit down till your mother turns up." Ronny replied by ordering one of Fielding's

servants to fetch his master at once. "He may not understand that. Allow me--" Aziz repeated the order idiomatically. Ronny was tempted to retort; he knew the type; he knew all the types, and this was the spoilt Westernized. But he was a servant of the Government, it was his job to avoid "incidents," so he said nothing, and ignored the provocation that Aziz continued to offer. Aziz was provocative. Everything he said had an impertinent flavour or jarred. His wings were failing, but he refused to fall without a struggle. He did not mean to be impertinent to Mr. Heaslop, who had never done him harm, but here was an Anglo-Indian who must become a man before comfort could be regained. He did not mean to be greasily confidential to Miss Quested, only to enlist her support; nor to be loud and jolly towards Professor Godbole. A strange quartette--he fluttering to the ground, she puzzled by the sudden ugliness, Ronny fuming, the Brahman observing all three, but with downcast eyes and hands folded, as if nothing was noticeable. A scene from a play, thought Fielding, who now saw them from the distance across the garden grouped among the blue pillars of his beautiful hall. "Don't trouble to come, mother," Ronny called; "we're just starting." Then he hurried to Fielding, drew him aside and said with pseudo-heartiness, "I say, old man, do excuse me, but I think perhaps you oughtn't to have left Miss Quested alone." "I'm sorry, what's up?" replied Fielding, also trying to be genial. "Well . . . I'm the sun-dried bureaucrat, no doubt; still, I don't like to see an English girl left smoking with two Indians." "She stopped, as she smokes, by her own wish, old man." "Yes, that's all right in England." "I really can't see the harm." "If you can't see, you can't see. . . . Can't you see that fellow's a bounder?" Aziz flamboyant, was patronizing Mrs. Moore. "He isn't a bounder," protested Fielding. "His nerves are on edge, that's all." "What should have upset his precious nerves?" "I don't know. He was all right when I left." "Well, it's nothing I've said," said Ronny reassuringly. "I never even spoke to him." "Oh well, come along now, and take your ladies away; the catastrophe over." "Fielding . . . don't think I'm taking it badly, or anything of that sort. . . . I suppose you won't come on to the polo with us? We should all be delighted." "I'm afraid I can't, thanks all the same. I'm awfully sorry you feel I've been remiss. I didn't mean to be." So the leave-taking began. Every one was cross or wretched. It was as if irritation exuded from the very soil. Could one have been so petty on a Scotch moor or an Italian alp? Fielding wondered afterwards. There seemed no reserve of tranquillity to draw upon in India. Either none, or else tranquillity swallowed up everything, as it appeared to do for Professor Godbole. Here was Aziz all shoddy and odious, Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested both silly, and he himself and Heaslop both decorous on the surface, but detestable really, and detesting each other. "Good-bye, Mr. Fielding, and thank you so much. What lovely College buildings!" "Good-bye, Mrs. Moore." "Good-bye, Mr. Fielding. Such an interesting afternoon . . ." "Good-bye, Miss Quested." "Good-bye, Dr. Aziz." "Good-bye, Mrs. Moore." "Good-bye, Dr. Aziz." "Good-bye, Miss Quested." He pumped her hand up and down to show that he felt at ease. "You'll jolly jolly well not forget those caves, won't you? I'll fix the whole show up in a jiffy." "Thank you . . ." Inspired by the devil to a final effort, he added, "What a shame you leave India so soon! Oh, do reconsider your decision, do stay." "Good-bye, Professor Godbole," she continued, suddenly agitated. "It's a shame we never heard you sing." "I may sing now," he replied, and did. His thin voice rose, and gave out one sound after another. At times there seemed rhythm, at times there was the illusion of a Western melody. But the ear, baffled repeatedly, soon lost any clue, and wandered in a maze of noises, none harsh or unpleasant, none intelligible. It was the song of an unknown bird. Only the servants understood it. They began to whisper to one another. The man who was gathering water chestnut came naked out of the tank, his lips parted with delight, disclosing his scarlet tongue. The sounds continued and ceased after a few moments as casually as they had begun-- apparently half through a bar, and upon the subs dominant. "Thanks so much: what was that?" asked Fielding. "I will explain in detail. It was a religious song. I placed myself in the position of a milkmaiden. I say to Shri Krishna, 'Come! come to me only.' The god refuses to come. I grow humble and say: 'Do not come to me only. Multiply yourself into a hundred Krishnas, and let one go to each of my hundred companions, but one, O Lord of the Universe, come to me.' He refuses to come. This is repeated several times. The song is composed in a raga appropriate to the present hour, which is the evening." "But He comes in some other song, I hope?" said Mrs. Moore gently. "Oh no, he refuses to come," repeated Godbole, perhaps not understanding her question. "I say to Him, Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come." Ronny's steps had died away, and there was a moment of absolute silence. No ripple disturbed the water, no leaf stirred.

CHAPTER VIII

Although Miss Quested had known Ronny well in England, she felt well advised to visit him before deciding to be his wife. India had developed sides of his character that she had never admired. His self-complacency, his censoriousness, his lack of subtlety, all grew vivid beneath a tropic sky; he seemed more indifferent than of old to what was passing in the minds of his fellows, more certain that he was right about them or that if he was wrong it didn't matter. When proved wrong, he was particularly exasperating; he always managed to suggest that she needn't have bothered to prove it. The point she made was never the relevant point, her arguments conclusive but barren, she was reminded that he had expert knowledge and she none, and that experience would not help her because she could not interpret it. A Public School, London University, a year at a crammer's, a particular sequence of posts in a particular province, a fall from a horse and a touch of fever were presented to her as the only training by which Indians and all who reside in their country can be understood; the only training she could comprehend, that is to say, for of course above Ronny there stretched the higher realms of knowledge, inhabited by Callendars and Turtons, who had been not one year in the country but twenty and whose instincts were superhuman. For himself he made no extravagant claims; she wished he would. It was the qualified bray of the callow official, the "I am not perfect, but--" that got on her nerves. How gross he had been at Mr. Fielding's--spoiling the talk and walking off in the middle of the haunting song! As he drove them away in the turn-turn, her irritation became unbearable, and she did not realize that much of it was directed against herself. She longed for an opportunity to fly out at him, and since he felt cross too, and they were both in India, an opportunity soon occurred. They had scarcely left the College grounds before she heard him say to his mother, who was with him on the front seat, "What was that about caves?" and she promptly opened fire. "Mrs. Moore, your delightful doctor has decided on a picnic, instead of a party in his house; we are to meet him out there--you, myself, Mr. Fielding, Professor Godbole--exactly the same party." "Out where?" asked Ronny. "The Marabar Caves." "Well, I'm blessed," he murmured after a pause. "Did he descend to any details?" "He did not. If you had spoken to him, we could have arranged them." He shook his head, laughing. "Have I said anything funny?" "I was only thinking how the worthy doctor's collar climbed up his neck." "I thought you were discussing the caves." "So I am. Aziz was exquisitely dressed, from tie-pin to spats, but he had forgotten his back collar-stud, and there you have the Indian all over: inattention to detail; the fundamental slackness that reveals the race. Similarly, to 'meet' in the caves as if they were the clock at Charing Cross, when they're miles from a station and each other." "Have you been to them?" "No, but I know all about them, naturally." "Oh, naturally!" "Are you too pledged to this expedition, mother?" "Mother is pledged to nothing," said Mrs. Moore, rather unexpectedly. " Certainly not to this polo. Will you drive up to the bungalow first, and drop me there, please? I prefer to rest." "Drop me too," said Adela. "I don't want to watch polo either, I'm sure." "Simpler to drop the polo," said Ronny. Tired and disappointed, he quite lost self-control, and added in a loud lecturing voice, "I won't have you messing about with Indians any more! If you want to go to the Marabar Caves, you'll go under British auspices." "I've never heard of these caves, I don't know what or where they are," said Mrs. Moore, "but I really can't have "--she tapped the cushion beside her--" so much quarrelling and tiresomeness!" The young people were ashamed. They dropped her at the bungalow and drove on together to the polo, feeling it was the least they could do. Their crackling bad humour left them, but the heaviness of their spirit remained; thunderstorms seldom clear the air. Miss Quested was thinking over her own behaviour, and didn't like it at all. Instead of weighing Ronny and herself, and coming to a reasoned conclusion about marriage, she had incidentally, in the course of a talk about mangoes, remarked to mixed company that she didn't mean to stop in India. Which meant that she wouldn't marry Ronny: but what a way to announce it, what a way for a civilized girl to behave! She owed him an explanation, but unfortunately there was nothing to explain. The "thorough talk" so dear to her principles and temperament had been postponed until too late. There seemed no point in being disagreeable to him and formulating her complaints against his character at this hour of the day, which was the evening. . . . The polo took place on the Maidan near the entrance of Chandrapore city. The sun was already declining and each of the trees held a premonition of night. They walked away from the governing group to a distant seat, and there, feeling that it was his due and her own, she forced out of herself the undigested remark: "We must have a thorough talk, Ronny, I'm afraid." "My temper's rotten, I must apologize," was his reply. "I didn't mean to order you and mother about, but of course the way those Bengalis let you down this morning annoyed me, and I don't want that sort of thing to keep happening." "It's nothing to do with them that I . . ." "No, but Aziz would make some similar muddle over the caves. He meant nothing by the invitation, I could tell by his voice; it's just their way of being pleasant." "It's something very different, nothing to do with caves, that I wanted to talk over with you." She gazed at the colourless grass. "I've finally decided we are not going to be married, my dear boy." The news hurt Ronny very much. He had heard Aziz announce that she would not return to the country, but had paid no attention to the remark, for he never dreamt that an Indian could be a channel of communication between two English people. He controlled himself and said gently, "You never said we should marry, my dear girl; you never bound either yourself or me--don't let this upset you." She felt ashamed. How decent he was! He might force his opinions down her throat, but did not press her to an "engagement," because he believed, like herself, in the sanctity of personal relationships: it was this that had drawn them together at their first meeting, which had occurred among the grand scenery of the English Lakes. Her ordeal was over, but she felt it should have been more painful and longer. Adela will not marry Ronny. It seemed

slipping away like a dream. She said, "But let us discuss things; it's all so frightfully important, we mustn't make false steps. I want next to hear your point of view about me--it might help us both." His manner was unhappy and reserved. "I don't much believe in this discussing--besides, I'm so dead with all this extra work Mohurram's bringing, if you'll excuse me." "I only want everything to be absolutely clear between us, and to answer any questions you care to put to me on my conduct." "But I haven't got any questions. You've acted within your rights, you were quite right to come out and have a look at me doing my work, it was an excellent plan, and anyhow it's no use talking further--we should only get up steam." He felt angry and bruised; he was too proud to tempt her back, but he did not consider that she had behaved badly, because where his compatriots were concerned he had a generous mind. "I suppose that there is nothing else; it's unpardonable of me to have given you and your mother all this bother," said Miss Quested heavily, and frowned up at the tree beneath which they were sitting. A little green bird was observing her, so brilliant and neat that it might have hopped straight out of a shop. On catching her eye it closed its own, gave a small skip and prepared to go to bed. Some Indian wild bird. "Yes, nothing else," she repeated, feeling that a profound and passionate speech ought to have been delivered by one or both of them. "We've been awfully British over it, but I suppose that's all right." "As we are British, I suppose it is." "Anyhow we've not quarrelled, Ronny." "Oh, that would have been too absurd. Why should we quarrel?" "I think we shall keep friends." "I know we shall." "Quite so." As soon as they had exchanged this admission, a wave of relief passed through them both, and then transformed itself into a wave of tenderness, and passed back. They were softened by their own honesty, and began to feel lonely and unwise. Experiences, not character, divided them; they were not dissimilar, as humans go; indeed, when compared with the people who stood nearest to them in point of space they became practically identical. The Bhil who was holding an officer's polo pony, the Eurasian who drove the Nawab Bahadur's car, the Nawab Bahadur himself, the Nawab Bahadur's debauched grandson--none would have examined a difficulty so frankly and coolly. The mere fact of examination caused it to diminish. Of course they were friends, and for ever. "Do you know what the name of that green bird up above us is?" she asked, putting her shoulder rather nearer to his. "Bee-eater." "Oh no, Ronny, it has red bars on its wings." "Parrot," he hazarded. "Good gracious no." The bird in question dived into the dome of the tree. It was of no importance, yet they would have liked to identify it, it would somehow have solaced their hearts. But nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else. "McBryde has an illustrated bird book," he said dejectedly. "I'm no good at all at birds, in fact I'm useless at any information outside my own job. It's a great pity." "So am I. I'm useless at everything." "What do I hear?" shouted the Nawab Bahadur at the top of his voice, causing both of them to start. "What most improbable statement have I heard? An English lady useless? No, no, no, no, no." He laughed genially, sure, within limits, of his welcome. "Hallo, Nawab Bahadur! Been watching the polo again?" said Ronny tepidly. "I have, sahib, I have." "How do you do?" said Adela, likewise pulling herself together. She held out her hand. The old gentleman judged from so wanton a gesture that she was new to his country, but he paid little heed. Women who exposed their face became by that one act so mysterious to him that he took them at the valuation of their men folk rather than at his own. Perhaps they were not immoral, and anyhow they were not his affair. On seeing the City Magistrate alone with a maiden at twilight, he had borne down on them with hospitable intent. He had a new little car, and wished to place it at their disposal; the City Magistrate would decide whether the offer was acceptable. Ronny was by this time rather ashamed of his curtness to Aziz and Godbole, and here was an opportunity of showing that he could treat Indians with consideration when they deserved it. So he said to Adela, with the same sad friendliness that he had employed when discussing the bird, "Would half an hour's spin entertain you at all?" "Oughtn't we to get back to the bungalow?" "Why?" He gazed at her. "I think perhaps I ought to see your mother and discuss future plans." "That's as you like, but there's no hurry, is there?" "Let me take you to the bungalow, and first the little spin," cried the old man, and hastened to the car. "He may show you some aspect of the country I can't, and he's a real loyalist. I thought you might care for a bit of a change." Determined to give him no more trouble, she agreed, but her desire to see India had suddenly decreased. There had been a factitious element in it. How should they seat themselves in the car? The elegant grandson had to be left behind. The Nawab Bahadur got up in front, for he had no intention of neighbouring an English girl. "Despite my advanced years, I am learning to drive," he said. "Man can learn everything if he will but try." And foreseeing a further difficulty, he added, "I do not do the actual steering. I sit and ask my chauffeur questions, and thus learn the reason for everything that is done before I do it myself. By this method serious and I may say ludicrous accidents, such as befell one of my compatriots during that delightful reception at the English Club, are avoided. Our good Panna Lal! I hope, sahib, that great damage was not done to your flowers. Let us have our little spin down the Gangavati road. Half one league onwards!" He fell asleep. Ronny instructed the chauffeur to take the Marabar road rather than the Gangavati, since the latter was under repair, and settled himself down beside the lady he had lost. The car made a burring noise and rushed along a chauss&#65533;that ran upon an embankment above melancholy fields. Trees of a poor quality bordered, the road, indeed the whole scene was inferior, and suggested that the countryside was too vast to admit of excellence. In vain did each item in it call out, "Come, come." There was not enough god to go round. The two young people conversed feebly and felt unimportant. When the darkness began, it seemed to well out of the meagre vegetation, entirely covering the fields each side of them before it brimmed over the road. Ronny's face grew dim--an event that always increased her esteem for his character. Her hand touched his, owing to a jolt, and

one of the thrills so frequent in the animal kingdom passed between them, and announced that all their difficulties were only a lovers' quarrel. Each was too proud to increase the pressure, but neither withdrew it, and a spurious unity descended on them, as local and temporary as the gleam that inhabits a firefly. It would vanish in a moment, perhaps to reappear, but the darkness is alone durable. And the night that encircled them, absolute as it seemed, was itself only a spurious unity, being modified by the gleams of day that leaked up round the edges of the earth, and by the stars. They gripped . . . bump, jump, a swerve, two wheels lifted in the air, brakes on, bump with tree at edge of embankment, standstill. An accident. A slight one. Nobody hurt. The Nawab Bahadur awoke. He cried out in Arabic, and violently tugged his beard. "What's the damage?" enquired Ronny, after the moment's pause that he permitted himself before taking charge of a situation. The Eurasian, inclined to be flustered, rallied to the sound of his voice, and, every inch an Englishman, replied, "You give me five minutes' time, I'll take you any dam anywhere." "Frightened, Adela?" He released her hand. "Not a bit." "I consider not to be frightened the height of folly," cried the Nawab Bahadur quite rudely. "Well, it's all over now, tears are useless," said Ronny, dismounting. "We had some luck butting that tree." "All over . . . oh yes, the danger is past, let us smoke cigarettes, let us do anything we please. Oh yes . . enjoy ourselves--oh my merciful God . . ." His words died into Arabic again. "Wasn't the bridge. We skidded." "We didn't skid," said Adela, who had seen the cause of the accident, and thought everyone must have seen it too. "We ran into an animal." A loud cry broke from the old man: his terror was disproportionate and ridiculous. "An animal?" "A large animal rushed up out of the dark on the right and hit us." "By Jove, she's right," Ronny exclaimed. "The paint's gone." "By Jove, sir, your lady is right," echoed the Eurasian. Just by the hinges of the door was a dent, and the door opened with difficulty. "Of course I'm right. I saw its hairy back quite plainly." "I say, Adela, what was it?" "I don't know the animals any better than the birds here--too big for a goat." "Exactly, too big for a goat . . ." said the old man. Ronny said, "Let's go into this; let's look for its tracks." "Exactly; you wish to borrow this electric torch." The English people walked a few steps back into the darkness, united and happy. Thanks to their youth and upbringing, they were not upset by the accident. They traced back the writhing of the tyres to the source of their disturbance. It was just after the exit from a bridge; the animal had probably come up out of the nullah. Steady and smooth ran the marks of the car, ribbons neatly nicked with lozenges, then all went mad. Certainly some external force had impinged, but the road had been used by too many objects for any one track to be legible, and the torch created such high lights and black shadows that they could not interpret what it revealed. Moreover, Adela in her excitement knelt and swept her skirts about, until it was she if anyone who appeared to have attacked the car. The incident was a great relief to them both. They forgot their abortive personal relationship, and felt adventurous as they muddied about in the dust. "I believe it was a buffalo," she called to their host, who had not accompanied them. "Exactly." "Unless it was a hyena." Ronny approved this last conjecture. Hyenas prowl in nullahs and headlights dazzle them. "Excellent, a hyena," said the Indian with an angry irony and a gesture at the night. "Mr. Harris!" "Half a mo-ment. Give me ten minutes' time." "Sahib says hyena." "Don't worry Mr. Harris. He saved us from a nasty smash. Harris, well done!" "A smash, sahib, that would not have taken place had he obeyed and taken us Gangavati side, instead of Marabar." "My fault that. I told him to come this way because the road's better. Mr. Lesley has made it pukka right up to the hills." "Ah, now I begin to understand." Seeming to pull himself together, he apologized slowly and elaborately for the accident. Ronny murmured, "Not at all," but apologies were his due, and should have started sooner: because English people are so calm at a crisis, it is not to be assumed that they are unimportant. The Nawab Bahadur had not come out very well. At that moment a large car approached from the opposite direction. Ronny advanced a few steps down the road, and with authority in his voice and gesture stopped it. It bore the inscription "Mudkul State" across its bonnet. All friskiness and friendliness, Miss Derek sat inside. "Mr. Heaslop, Miss Quested, what are you holding up an innocent female for?" "We've had a breakdown." "But how putrid!" "We ran into a hyena!" "How absolutely rotten!" "Can you give us a lift?" "Yes, indeed." "Take me too," said the Nawab Bahadur. "Heh, what about me?" cried Mr. Harris. "Now what's all this? I'm not an omnibus," said Miss Derek with decision. "I've a harmonium and two dogs in here with me as it is. I'll take three of you if one'll sit in front and nurse a pug. No more." "I will sit in front," said the Nawab Bahadur. "Then hop in: I've no notion who you are." "Heh no, what about my dinner? I can't be left alone all the night." Trying to look and feel like a European, the chauffeur interposed aggressively. He still wore a topi, despite the darkness, and his face, to which the Ruling Race had contributed little beyond bad teeth, peered out of it pathetically, and seemed to say, "What's it all about? Don't worry me so, you blacks and whites. Here I am, stuck in dam India same as you, and you got to fit me in better than this." "Nussu will bring you out some suitable dinner upon a bicycle," said the Nawab Bahadur, who had regained his usual dignity. "I shall despatch him with all possible speed. Meanwhile, repair my car." They sped off, and Mr. Harris, after a reproachful glance, squatted down upon his hams. When English and Indians were both present, he grew self-conscious, because he did not know to whom he belonged. For a little he was vexed by opposite currents in his blood, then they blended, and he belonged to no one but himself. But Miss Derek was in tearing spirits. She had succeeded in stealing the Mudkul car. Her Maharajah would be awfully sick, but she didn't mind, he could sack her if he liked. "I don't believe in these people letting you down," she said. "If I didn't snatch like the devil, I should be nowhere. He doesn't want the car, silly fool! Surely it's to the credit of his State I should be seen about in it at Chandrapore during my leave. He ought to look at it that way. Anyhow he's got to look at it that way. My Maharani's different--my Maharani's a dear. That's her fox

terrier, poor little devil. I fished them out both with the driver. Imagine taking dogs to a Chiefs' Conference! As sensible as taking Chiefs, perhaps." She shrieked with laughter. "The harmonium--the harmonium's my little mistake, I own. They rather had me over the harmonium. I meant it to stop on the train. Oh lor' !" Ronny laughed with restraint. He did not approve of English people taking service under the Native States, where they obtain a certain amount of influence, but at the expense of the general prestige. The humorous triumphs of a free lance are of no assistance to an administrator, and he told the young lady that she would outdo Indians at their own game if she went on much longer. "They always sack me before that happens, and then I get another job. The whole of India seethes with Maharanis and Ranis and Begums who clamour for such as me." "Really. I had no idea." "How could you have any idea, Mr. Heaslop? What should he know about Maharanis, Miss Quested? Nothing. At least I should hope not." "I understand those big people are not particularly interesting," said Adela, quietly, disliking the young woman's tone. Her hand touched Ronny's again in the darkness, and to the animal thrill there was now added a coincidence of opinion. "Ah, there you're wrong. They're priceless." "I would scarcely call her wrong," broke out the Nawab Bahadur, from his isolation on the front seat, whither they had relegated him. "A Native State, a Hindu State, the wife of a ruler of a Hindu State, may beyond doubt be a most excellent lady, and let it not be for a moment supposed that I suggest anything against the character of Her Highness the Maharani of Mudkul. But I fear she will be uneducated, I fear she will be superstitious. Indeed, how could she be otherwise? What opportunity of education has such a lady had? Oh, superstition is terrible, terrible! oh, it is the great defect in our Indian character! "--and as if to point his criticism, the lights of the civil station appeared on a rise to the right. He grew more and more voluble. "Oh, it is the duty of each and every citizen to shake superstition off, and though I have little experience of Hindu States, and none of this particular one, namely Mudkul (the Ruler, I fancy, has a salute of but eleven guns)-- yet I cannot imagine that they have been as successful as British India, where we see reason and orderliness spreading in every direction, like a most health-giving flood!" Miss Derek said "Golly!" Undeterred by the expletive, the old man swept on. His tongue had been loosed and his mind had several points to make. He wanted to endorse Miss Quested's remark that big people are not interesting, because he was bigger himself than many an independent chief; at the same time, he must neither remind nor inform her that he was big, lest she felt she had committed a discourtesy. This was the groundwork of his oration; worked in with it was his gratitude to Miss Derek for the lift, his willingness to hold a repulsive dog in his arms, and his general regret for the trouble he had caused the human race during the evening. Also he wanted to be dropped near the city to get hold of his cleaner, and to see what mischief his grandson was up to. As he wove all these anxieties into a single rope, he suspected that his audience felt no interest, and that the City Magistrate fondled either maiden behind the cover of the harnionium, but good breeding compelled him to continue; it was nothing to him if they were bored, because he did not know what boredom is, and it was nothing to him if they were licentious, because God has created all races to be different. The accident was over, and his life, equably useful, distinguished, happy, ran on as before and expressed itself in streams of well-chosen words. When this old geyser left them, Ronny made no comment, but talked lightly about polo; Turton had taught him that it is sounder not to discuss a man at once, and he reserved what he had to say on the Nawab's character until later in the evening. His hand, which he had removed to say good-bye, touched Adela's again; she caressed it definitely, he responded, and their firm and mutual pressure surely meant something. They looked at each other when they reached the bungalow, for Mrs. Moore was inside it. It was for Miss Quested to speak, and she said nervously, "Ronny, I should like to take back what I said on the Maidan." He assented, and they became engaged to be married in consequence. Neither had foreseen such a consequence. She had meant to revert to her former condition of important and cultivated uncertainty, but it had passed out of her reach at its appropriate hour. Unlike the green bird or the hairy animal, she was labelled now. She felt humiliated again, for she deprecated labels, and she felt too that there should have been another scene between her lover and herself at this point, something dramatic and lengthy. He was pleased instead of distressed, he was surprised, but he had really nothing to say. What indeed is there to say? To be or not to be married, that was the question, and they had decided it in the affirmative. "Come along and let's tell the mater all this"--opening the perforated zinc door that protected the bungalow from the swarms of winged creatures. The noise woke the mater up. She had been dreaming of the absent children who were so seldom mentioned, Ralph and Stella, and did not at first grasp what was required of her. She too had become used to thoughtful procrastination, and felt alarmed when it came to an end. When the announcement was over, he made a gracious and honest remark. "Look here, both of you, see India if you like and as you like--I know I made myself rather ridiculous at Fielding's, but . . . it's different now. I wasn't quite sure of myself." "My duties here are evidently finished, I don't want to see India now; now for my passage back," was Mrs. Moore's thought. She reminded herself of all that a happy marriage means, and of her own happy marriages, one of which had produced Ronny. Adela's parents had also been happily married, and excellent it was to see the incident repeated by the younger generation. On and on! the number of such unions would certainly increase as education spread and ideals grew loftier, and characters firmer. But she was tired by her visit to Government College, her feet ached, Mr. Fielding had walked too fast and far, the young people had annoyed her in the turn-turn, and given her to suppose they were breaking with each other, and though it was all right now she could not speak as enthusiastically of wedlock or of anything as she should have done. Ronny was suited, now she must go home and help the others, if they wished. She was past marrying herself,

even unhappily; her function was to help others, her reward to be informed that she was sympathetic. Elderly ladies must not expect more than this. They dined alone. There was much pleasant and affectionate talk about the future. Later on they spoke of passing events, and Ronny reviewed and recounted the day from his own point of view. It was a different day from the women's because while they had enjoyed themselves or thought, he had worked. Mohurram was approaching, and as usual the Chandrapore Mohammedans were building paper towers of a size too large to pass under the branches of a certain pepul tree. One knew what happened next; the tower stuck, a Mohammedan climbed up the pepul and cut the branch off, the Hindus protested, there was a religious riot, and Heaven knew what, with perhaps the troops sent for. There had been deputations and conciliation committees under the auspices of Turton, and all the normal work of Chandrapore had been hung up. Should the procession take another route, or should the towers be shorter? The Mohammedans offered the former, the Hindus insisted on the latter. The Collector had favoured the Hindus, until he suspected that they had artificially bent the tree nearer the ground. They said it sagged naturally. Measurements, plans, an official visit to the spot. But Ronny had not disliked his day, for it proved that the British were necessary to India; there would certainly have been bloodshed without them. His voice grew complacent again; he was here not to be pleasant but to keep the peace, and now that Adela had promised to be his wife, she was sure to understand. "What does our old gentleman of the car think?" she asked, and her negligent tone was exactly what he desired. "Our old gentleman is helpful and sound, as he always is over public affairs. You've seen in him our show Indian." "Have I really?" "I'm afraid so. Incredible, aren't they, even the best of them? They're all--they all forget their back collar studs sooner or later. You've had to do with three sets of Indians to-day, the Bhattacharyas, Aziz, and this chap, and it really isn't a coincidence that they've all let you down." "I like Aziz, Aziz is my real friend," Mrs. Moore interposed. "When the animal runs into us the Nawab loses his head, deserts his unfortunate chauffeur, intrudes upon Miss Derek . . . no great crimes, no great crimes, but no white man would have done it." "What animal?" "Oh, we had a small accident on the Marabar Road. Adela thinks it was a hyena." "An accident?" she cried. "Nothing; no one hurt. Our excellent host awoke much rattled from his dreams, appeared to think it was our fault, and chanted exactly, exactly." Mrs. Moore shivered, "A ghost!" But the idea of a ghost scarcely passed her lips. The young people did not take it up, being occupied with their own outlooks, and deprived of support it perished, or was reabsorbed into the part of the mind that seldom speaks. "Yes, nothing criminal," Ronny summed up, "but there's the native, and there's one of the reasons why we don't admit him to our clubs, and how a decent girl like Miss Derek can take service under natives puzzles me. . . . But I must get on with my work. Krishna!" Krishna was the peon who should have brought the files from his office. He had not turned up, and a terrific row ensued. Ronny stormed, shouted, howled, and only the experienced observer could tell that he was not angry, did not much want the files, and only made a row because it was the custom. Servants, quite understanding, ran slowly in circles, carrying hurricane lamps. Krishna the earth, Krishna the stars replied, until the Englishman was appeased by their echoes, fined the absent peon eight annas, and sat down to his arrears in the next room. "Will you play Patience with your future mother-inlaw, dear Adela, or does it seem too tame?" "I should like to--I don't feel a bit excited--I'm just glad it's settled up at last, but I'm not conscious of vast changes. We are all three the same people still." "That's much the best feeling to have." She dealt out the first row of "demon." "I suppose so," said the girl thoughtfully. "I feared at Mr. Fielding's that it might be settled the other way . . . black knave on a red queen. . . ." They chatted gently about the game. Presently Adela said: "You heard me tell Aziz and Godbole I wasn't stopping in their country. I didn't mean it, so why did I say it? I feel I haven't been-- frank enough, attentive enough, or something. It's as if I got everything out of proportion. You have been so very good to me, and I meant to be good when I sailed, but somehow I haven't been. . . . Mrs. Moore, if one isn't absolutely honest, what is the use of existing?" She continued to lay out her cards. The words were obscure, but she understood the uneasiness that produced them. She had experienced it twice herself, during her own engagements--this vague contrition and doubt. All had come right enough afterwards and doubtless would this time--marriage makes most things right enough. "I wouldn't worry," she said. "It's partly the odd surroundings; you and I keep on attending to trifles instead of what's important; we are what the people here call 'new.'" "You mean that my bothers are mixed up with India?" "India's--" She stopped. "What made you call it a ghost?" "Call what a ghost?" "The animal thing that hit us. Didn't you say 'Oh, a ghost,' in passing." "I couldn't have been thinking of what I was saying." "It was probably a hyena, as a matter of fact." "Ah, very likely." And they went on with their Patience. Down in Chandrapore the Nawab Bahadur waited for his car. He sat behind his town house (a small unfurnished building which he rarely entered) in the midst of the little court that always improvises itself round Indians of position. As if turbans were the natural product of darkness a fresh one would occasionally froth to the front, incline itself towards him, and retire. He was preoccupied, his diction was appropriate to a religious subject. Nine years previously, when first he had had a car, he had driven it over a drunken man and killed him, and the man had been waiting for him ever since. The Nawab Bahadut was innocent before God and the Law, he had paid double the compensation necessary; but it was no use, the man continued to wait in an unspeakable form, close to the scene of his death. None of the English people knew of this, nor did the chauffeur; it was a racial secret communicable more by blood than speech. He spoke now in horror of the particular circumstances; he had led others into danger, he had risked the lives of two innocent and honoured guests. He repeated, "If I had been killed, what matter? it must happen sometime; but they who trusted me--" The company shuddered and

invoked the mercy of God. Only Aziz held aloof, because a personal experience restrained him: was it not by despising ghosts that he had come to know Mrs. Moore? "You know, Nureddin," he whispered to the grandson--an effeminate youth whom he seldom met, always liked, and invariably forgot--" you know, my dear fellow, we Moslems simply must get rid of these superstitions, or India will never advance. How long must I hear of the savage pig upon the Marabar Road?" Nureddin looked down. Aziz continued: "Your grandfather belongs to another generation, and I respect and love the old gentleman, as you know. I say nothing against him, only that it is wrong for us, because we are young. I want you to promise me--Nureddin, are you listening?--not to believe in Evil Spirits, and if I die (for my health grows very weak) to bring up my three children to disbelieve in them too." Nureddin smiled, and a suitable answer rose to his pretty lips, but before he could make it the car arrived, and his grandfather took him away. The game of Patience up in the civil lines went on longer than this. Mrs. Moore continued to murmur "Red ten on a black knave," Miss Quested to assist her, and to intersperse among the intricacies of the play details about the hyena, the engagement, the Maharani of Mudkul, the Bhattacharyas, and the day generally, whose rough desiccated surface acquired as it receded a definite outline, as India itself might, could it be viewed from the moon. Presently the players went to bed, but not before other people had woken up elsewhere, people whose emotions they could not share, and whose existence they ignored. Never tranquil, never perfectly dark, the night wore itself away, distinguished from other nights by two or three blasts of wind, which seemed to fall perpendicularly out of the sky and to bounce back into it, hard and compact, leaving no freshness behind them: the hot weather was approaching.

CHAPTER IX

Aziz fell ill as he foretold--slightly ill. Three days later he lay abed in his bungalow, pretending to be very ill. It was a touch of fever, which he would have neglected if there was anything important at the hospital. Now and then he groaned and thought he should die, but did not think so for long, and a very little diverted him. It was Sunday, always an equivocal day in the East, and an excuse for slacking. He could hear church bells as he drowsed, both from the civil station and from the missionaries out beyond the slaughter house--different bells and rung with different intent, for one set was calling firmly to Anglo-India, and the other feebly to mankind. He did not object to the first set; the other he ignored, knowing their inefficiency. Old Mr. Graysford and young Mr. Sorley made converts during a famine, because they distributed food; but when times improved they were naturally left alone again, and though surprised and aggrieved each time this happened, they never learnt wisdom. "No Englishman understands us except Mr. Fielding," he thought; "but how shall I see him again? If he entered this room the disgrace of it would kill me." He called to Hassan to clear up, but Hassan, who was testing his wages by ringing them on the step of the verandah, found it possible not to hear him; heard and didn't hear, just as Aziz had called and hadn't called. "That's India all over . . . how like us . . . there we are . . ." He dozed again, and his thoughts wandered over the varied surface of life. Gradually they steadied upon a certain spot--the Bottomless Pit according to missionaries, but he had never regarded it as more than a dimple. Yes, he did want to spend an evening with some girls, singing and all that, the vague jollity that would culminate in voluptuousness. Yes, that was what he did want. How could it be managed? If Major Callendar had been an Indian, he would have remembered what young men are, and granted two or three days' leave to Calcutta without asking questions. But the Major assumed either that his subordinates were made of ice, or that they repaired to the Chandrapore bazaars--disgusting ideas both. It was only Mr. Fielding who-- "Hassan!" The servant came running. "Look at those flies, brother;" and he pointed to the horrible mass that hung from the ceiling. The nucleus was a wire which had been inserted as a homage to electricity. Electricity had paid no attention, and a colony of eye-flies had come instead and blackened the coils with their bodies. "Huzoor, those are flies." "Good, good, they are, excellent, but why have I called you?" "To drive them elsewhere," said Hassan, after painful thought. "Driven elsewhere, they always return." "Huzoor." "You must make some arrangement against flies; that is why you are my servant," said Aziz gently. Hassan would call the little boy to borrow the stepladder from Mahmoud Ali's house; he would order the cook to light the Primus stove and heat water; he would personally ascend the steps with a bucket in his arms, and dip the end of the coil into it. "Good, very good. Now what have you to do?" "Kill flies." "Good. Do it." Hassan withdrew, the plan almost lodged in his head, and began to look for the little boy. Not finding him, his steps grew slower, and he stole back to his post on the verandah, but did not go on testing his rupees, in case his master heard them clink. On twittered the Sunday bells; the East had returned to the East via the suburbs of England, and had become ridiculous during the detour. Aziz continued to think about beautiful women. His mind here was hard and direct, though not brutal. He had learnt all he needed concerning his own constitution many years ago, thanks to the social order into which he had been born, and when he came to study medicine he was repelled by the pedantry and fuss with which Europe tabulates the facts of sex. Science seemed to discuss everything from the wrong end. It didn't interpret his experiences when he found them in a German manual, because by being there they ceased to be his experiences. What he had been told by his father or mother or had picked up from servants--it was information of that sort that he found useful, and handed on as occasion offered to others. But he must not bring any disgrace on his children by some silly escapade. Imagine if it got about that he was not respectable! His professional position too must be

considered, whatever Major Callendar thought. Aziz upheld the proprieties, though he did not invest them with any moral halo, and it was here that he chiefly differed from an Englishman. His conventions were social. There is no harm in deceiving society as long as she does not find you out, because it is only when she finds you out that you have harmed her; she is not like a friend or God, who are injured by the mere existence of unfaithfulness. Quite clear about this, he meditated what type of lie he should tell to get away to Calcutta, and had thought of a man there who could be trusted to send him a wire and a letter that he could show to Major Callendar, when the noise of wheels was heard in his compound. Someone had called to enquire. The thought of sympathy increased his fever, and with a sincere groan he wrapped himself in his quilt. "Aziz, my dear fellow, we are greatly concerned," said Hamidullah's voice. One, two, three, four bumps, as people sat down upon his bed. "When a doctor falls ill it is a serious matter," said the voice of Mr. Syed Mohammed, the assistant engineer. "When an engineer falls ill, it is equally important," said the voice of Mr. Haq, a police inspector. "Oh yes, we are all jolly important, our salaries prove it." "Dr. Aziz took tea with our PrincIpal last Thursday afternoon," piped Rafi, the engineer's nephew. "Professor Godbole, who also attended, has sickened too, which seems rather a curious thing, sir, does it not?" Flames of suspicion leapt up in the breast of each man. "Humbug!" exclaimed Hamidullah, in authoritative tones, quenching them. "Humbug, most certainly," echoed the others, ashamed of themselves. The wicked schoolboy, having failed to start a scandal, lost confidence and stood up with his back to the wall. "Is Professor Godbole ill?" enquired Aziz, penetrated by the news. "I am sincerely sorry." Intelligent and compassionate, his face peeped out of the bright crimson folds of the quilt. "How do you do, Mr. Syed Mohammed, Mr. Haq? How very kind of you to enquire after my health! How do you do, Hamidullah? But you bring me bad news. What is wrong with him, the excellent fellow?" "Why don't you answer, Rafi? You're the great authority," said his uncle. "Yes, Rafi's the great man," said Hamidullah, rubbing it in. "Rafi is the Sherlock Holmes of Chandrapore. Speak up, Rafi." Less than the dust, the schoolboy murmured the word "Diarrhcra," but took courage as soon as it had been uttered, for it improved his position. Flames of suspicion shot up again in the breasts of his elders, though in a different direction. Could what was called diarrhcea really be an early case of cholera? "If this is so, this is a very serious thing: this is scarcely the end of March. Why have I not been informed?" cried Aziz. "Dr. Panna Lal attends him, sir." "Oh yes, both Hindus; there we have it; they hang together like flies and keep everything dark. Rafi, come here. Sit down. Tell me all the details. Is there vomiting also?" "Oh yes indeed, sir, and the serious pains." "That settles it. In twenty-four hours he will be dead." Everybody looked and felt shocked, but Professor Godbole had diminished his appeal by linking himself with a co-religionist. He moved them less than when he had appeared as a suffering individual. Before long they began to condemn him as a source of infection. "All illness proceeds from Hindus," Mr. Haq said. Mr. Syed Mohammed had visited religious fairs, at Allahabad and at Ujjain, and described them with biting scorn. At Allahabad there was flowing water, which carried impurities away, but at Ujjain the little river Sipra was banked up, and thousands of bathers deposited their germs in the pool. He spoke with disgust of the hot sun, the cowdung and marigold flowers, and the encampment of saddhus, some of whom strode stark naked through the streets. Asked what was the name of the chief idol at Ujjain, he replied that he did not know, he had disdained to enquire, he really could not waste his time over such trivialities. His outburst took some time, and in his excitement he fell into Punjabi (he came from that side) and was unintelligible. Aziz liked to hear his religion praised. It soothed the surface of his mind, and allowed beautiful images to form beneath. When the engineer's noisy tirade was finished, he said, "That is exactly my own view." He held up his hand, palm outward, his eyes began to glow, his heart to fill with tenderness. Issuing still farther from his quilt, he recited a poem by Ghalib. It had no connection with anything that had gone before, but it came from his heart and spoke to theirs. They were overwhelmed by its pathos; pathos, they agreed, is the highest quality in art; a poem should touch the hearer with a sense of his own weakness, and should institute some comparison between mankind and flowers. The squalid bedroom grew quiet; the silly intrigues, the gossip, the shallow discontent were stilled, while words accepted as immortal filled the indifferent air. Not as a call to battle, but as a calm assurance came the feeling that India was one; Moslem; always had been; an assurance that lasted until they looked out of the door. Whatever Ghalib had felt, he had anyhow lived in India, and this consolidated it for them: he had gone with his own tulips and roses, but tulips and roses do not go. And the sister kingdoms of the north--Arabia, Persia, Ferghana, Turkestan-- stretched out their hands as he sang, sadly, because all beauty is sad, and greeted ridiculous Chandrapore, where every street and house was divided against itself, and told her that she was a continent and a unity. Of the company, only Hamidullah had any comprehension of poetry. The minds of the others were inferior and rough. Yet they listened with pleasure, because literature had not been divorced from their civilization. The police inspector, for instance, did not feel that Aziz had degraded himself by reciting, nor break into the cheery guffaw with which an Englishman averts the infection of beauty. He just sat with his mind empty, and when his thoughts, which were mainly ignoble, flowed back into it they had a pleasant freshness. The poem had done no "good" to anyone, but it was a passing reminder, a breath from the divine lips of beauty, a nightingale between two worlds of dust. Less explicit than the call to Krishna, it voiced our loneliness nevertheless, our isolation, our need for the Friend who never comes yet is not entirely disproved. Aziz it left thinking about women again, but in a different way: less definite, more intense. Sometimes poetry had this effect on him, sometimes it only increased his local desires, and he never knew beforehand which effect would ensue: he could discover no rule for this or for anything else in life. Hamidullah had called in on

his way to a worrying committee of notables, nationalist in tendency, where Hindus, Moslems, two Sikhs, two Parsis, a Jam, and a Native Christian tried to like one another more than came natural to them. As long as someone abused the English, all went well, but nothing constructive had been achieved, and if the English were to leave India, the committee would vanish also. He was glad that Aziz, whom he loved and whose family was connected with his own, took no interest in politics, which ruin the character and career, yet nothing can be achieved without them. He thought of Cambridge--sadly, as of another poem that had ended. How happy he had been there, twenty years ago! Politics had not mattered in Mr. and Mrs. Bannister's rectory. There, games, work, and pleasant society had interwoven, and appeared to be sufficient substructure for a national life. Here all was wire-pulling and fear. Messrs. Syed Mohammed and Haq--he couldn't even trust them, although they had come in his carriage, and the schoolboy was a scorpion. Bending down, he said, "Aziz, Aziz, my dear boy, we must be going, we are already late. Get well quickly, for I do not know what our little circle would do without you." "I shall not forget those affectionate words," replied Aziz. "Add mine to them," said the engineer. "Thank you, Mr. Syed Mohammed, I will." "And mine," "And, sir, accept mine," cried the others, stirred each according to his capacity towards goodwill. Little ineffectual unquenchable flames! The company continued to sit on the bed and to chew sugarcane, which Hassan had run for into the bazaar, and Aziz drank a cup of spiced milk. Presently there was the sound of another carriage. Dr. Panna Lal had arrived, driven by horrid Mr. Ram Chand. The atmosphere of a sick-room was at once re-established, and the invalid retired under his quilt. "Gentlemen, you will excuse, I have come to enquire by Major Callendar's orders," said the Hindu, nervous of the den of fanatics into which his curiosity had called him. "Here he lies," said Hamidullah, indicating the prostrate form. "Dr. Aziz, Dr. Aziz, I come to enquire." Aziz presented an expressionless face to the thermometer. "Your hand also, please." He took it, gazed at the flies on the ceiling, and finally announced, "Some temperature." "I think not much," said Ram Chand, desirous of fomenting trouble. "Some; he should remain in bed," repeated Dr. Panna Lal, and shook the thermometer down, so that its altitude remained for ever unknown. He loathed his young colleague since the disasters with Dapple, and he would have liked to do him a bad turn and report to Major Callendar that he was shamming. But he might want a day in bed himself soon,--besides, though Major Callendar always believed the worst of natives, he never believed them when they carried tales about one another. Sympathy seemed the safer course. "How is stomach?" he enquired, "how head?" And catching sight of the empty cup, he recommended a milk diet. "This is a great relief to us, it is very good of you to call, Doctor Sahib," said Hamidullah, buttering him up a bit. "It is only my duty." "We know how busy you are." "Yes, that is true." "And how much illness there is in the city." The doctor suspected a trap in this remark; if he admitted that there was or was not illness, either statement might be used against him. "There is always illness," he replied, "and I am always busy--it is a doctor's nature." "He has not a minute, he is due double sharp at Government College now," said Ram Chand. "You attend Professor Godbole there perhaps?" The doctor looked professional and was silent. "We hope his diarrhoea is ceasing." "He progresses, but not from diarrhoea." "We are in some anxiety over him--he and Dr. Aziz are great friends. If you could tell us the name of his complaint we should be grateful to you." After a cautious pause he said, "Haemorrhoids." "And so much, my dear Rafi, for your cholera," hooted Aziz, unable to restrain himself. "Cholera, cholera, what next, what now?" cried the doctor, greatly fussed. "Who spreads such untrue reports about my patients?" Hamidullah pointed to the culprit. "I hear cholera, I hear bubonic plague, I hear every species of lie. Where will it end, I ask myself sometimes. This city is full of misstatements, and the originators of them ought to be discovered and punished authoritatively." "Rafi, do you hear that? Now why do you stuff us up with all this humbug?" The schoolboy murmured that another boy had told him, also that the bad English grammar the Government obliged them to use often gave the wrong meaning for words, and so led scholars into mistakes. "That is no reason you should bring a charge against a doctor," said Ram Chand. "Exactly, exactly," agreed Hamidullah, anxious to avoid an unpleasantness. Quarrels spread so quickly and so far, and Messrs. Syed Mohammed and Haq looked cross, and ready to fly out. "You must apologize properly, Rafi, I can see your uncle wishes it," he said. "You have not yet said that you are sorry for the trouble you have caused this gentleman by your carelessness." "It is only a boy," said Dr. Panna Lal, appeased. "Even boys must learn," said Ram Chand. "Your own son failing to pass the lowest standard, I think," said Syed Mohammed suddenly. "Oh, indeed? Oh yes, perhaps. He has not the advantage of a relative in the Prosperity Printing Press." "Nor you the advantage of conducting their cases in the Courts any longer." Their voices rose. They attacked one another with obscure allusions and had a silly quarrel. Hamidullali and the doctor tried to make peace between them. In the midst of the din someone said, "I say! Is he ill or isn't he ill?" Mr. Fielding had entered unobserved. All rose to their feet, and Hassan, to do an Englishman honour, struck up with a sugar-cane at the coil of flies. Aziz said, "Sit down," coldly. What a room! What a meeting! Squalor and ugly talk, the floor strewn with fragments of cane and nuts, and spotted with ink, the pictures crooked upon the dirty walls, no punkah! He hadn't meant to live like this or among these third-rate people. And in his confusion he thought only of the insignificant Rafi, whom he had laughed at, and allowed to be teased. The boy must be sent away happy, or hospitality would have failed, along the whole line. "It is good of Mr. Fielding to condescend to visit our friend," said the police inspector. "We are touched by this great kindness." "Don't talk to him like that, he doesn't want it, and he doesn't want three chairs; he's not three Englishmen," he flashed. "Rafi, come here. Sit down again. I'm delighted you could come with Mr. Hamidullah, my dear boy; it will help me to recover, seeing you." "Forgive my mistakes," said Rafi, to consolidate himself. "Well, are you

ill, Aziz, or aren't you?" Fielding repeated. "No doubt Major Callendar has told you that I am shamming." "Well, are you?" The company laughed, friendly and pleased. "An Englishman at his best," they thought; "so genial." "Enquire from Dr. Panna Lal." "You're sure I don't tire you by stopping?" "Why, no! There are six people present in my small room already. Please remain seated, if you will excuse the informality." He turned away and continued to address Rafi, who was terrified at the arrival of his Principal, remembered that he had tried to spread slander about him, and yearned to get away. "He is ill and he is not ill," said Hamidullah, offering a cigarette. "And I suppose that most of us are in that same case." Fielding agreed; he and the pleasant sensitive barrister got on well. They were fairly intimate and beginning to trust each other. "The whole world looks to be dying, still it doesn't die, so we must assume the existence of a beneficent Providence." "Oh, that is true, how true!" said the policeman, thinking religion had been praised. "Does Mr. Fielding think it's true?" "Think which true? The world isn't dying. I'm certain of that!" "No, no--the existence of Providence." "Well, I don't believe in Providence." "But how then can you believe in God?" asked Syed Mohammed. "I don't believe in God." A tiny movement as of "I told you so!" passed round the company, and Aziz looked up for an instant, scandalized. "Is it correct that most are atheists in England now?" Hamidullah enquired. "The educated thoughtful people? I should say so, though they don't like the name. The truth is that the West doesn't bother much over belief and disbelief in these days. Fifty years ago, or even when you and I were young, much more fuss was made." "And does not morality also decline?" "It depends what you call--yes, yes, I suppose morality does decline." "Excuse the question, but if this is the case, how is England justified in holding India?" There they were! Politics again. "It's a question I can't get my mind on to," he replied. "I'm out here personally because I needed a job. I cannot tell you why England is here or whether she ought to be here. It's beyond me." "Well-qualified Indians also need jobs in the educational." "I guess they do; I got in first," said Fielding, smiling. "Then excuse me again--is it fair an Englishman should occupy one when Indians are available? Of course I mean nothing personally. Personally we are delighted you should be here, and we benefit greatly by this frank talk." There is only one answer to a conversation of this type: "England holds India for her good." Yet Fielding was disinclined to give it. The zeal for honesty had eaten him up. He said, "I'm delighted to be here too--that's my answer, there's my only excuse. I can't tell you anything about fairness. It mayn't have been fair I should have been born. I take up some other fellow's air, don't I, whenever I breathe? Still, I'm glad it's happened, and I'm glad I'm out here. However big a badmash one is-- if one's happy in consequence, that is some justification." The Indians were bewildered. The line of thought was not alien to them, but the words were too definite and bleak. Unless a sentence paid a few compliments to Justice and Morality in passing, its grammar wounded their ears and paralysed their minds. What they said and what they felt were (except in the case of affection) seldom the same. They had numerous mental conventions and when these were flouted they found it very difficult to function. Hamidullah bore up best. "And those Englishmen who are not delighted to be in India--have they no excuse?" he asked. "None. Chuck 'em out." "It may be difficult to separate them from the rest," he laughed. "Worse than difficult, wrong," said Mr. Ram Chand. "No Indian gentleman approves chucking out as a proper thing. Here we differ from those other nations. We are so spiritual." "Oh, that is true, how true!" said the police inspector. "Is it true, Mr. Haq? I don't consider us spiritual. We can't co-ordinate, we can't co-ordinate, it only comes to that. We can't keep engagements, we can't catch trains. What more than this is the so-called spirituality of India? You and I ought to be at the Committee of Notables, we're not; our friend Dr. Lal ought to be with his patients, he isn't. So we go on, and so we shall continue to go, I think, until the end of time." "It is not the end of time, it is scarcely ten-thirty, ha, ha!" cried Dr. Panna Lal, who was again in confident mood. "Gentlemen, if I may be allowed to say a few words, what an interesting talk, also thankfulness and gratitude to Mr. Fielding in the first place teaches our sons and gives them all the great benefits of his experience and judgment--" "Dr. Lal!" "Dr. Aziz?" "You sit on my leg." "I beg pardon, but some might say your leg kicks." "Come along, we tire the invalid in either case," said Fielding, and they filed out--four Mohammedans, two Hindus and the Englishman. They stood on the verandah while their conveyances were summoned out of various patches of shade. "Aziz has a high opinion of you, he only did not speak because of his illness." "I quite understand," said Fielding, who was rather disappointed with his call. The Club comment, "making himself cheap as usual," passed through his mind. He couldn't even get his horse brought up. He had liked Aziz so much at their first meeting, and had hoped for developments.

CHAPTER X

The heat had leapt forward in the last hour, the street was deserted as if a catastrophe had cleaned off humanity during the inconclusive talk. Opposite Aziz' bungalow stood a large unfinished house belonging to two brothers, astrologers, and a squirrel hung head-downwards on it, pressing its belly against burning scaffolding and twitching a mangy tail. It seemed the only occupant of the house, and the squeals it gave were in tune with the infinite, no doubt, but not attractive except to other squirrels. More noises came from a dusty tree, where brown birds creaked and floundered about looking for insects; another bird, the invisible coppersmith, had started his "ponk ponk." It matters so little to the majority of living beings what the minority, that calls itself human, desires or decides. Most of the inhabitants of India do not mind how India is governed. Nor are the lower animals of England concerned about England, but in the tropics the indifference is more prominent, the inarticulate world is closer at hand and readier to resume control as soon as men are.

tired. When the seven gentlemen who had held such various opinions inside the bungalow came out of it, they were aware of a common burden, a vague threat which they called "the bad weather coming." They felt that they could not do their work, or would not be paid enough for doing it. The space between them and their carriages, instead of being empty, was clogged with a medium that pressed against their flesh, the carriage cushions scalded their trousers, their eyes pricked, domes of hot water accumulated under their head-gear and poured down their cheeks. Salaaming feebly, they dispersed for the interior of other bungalows, to recover their self-esteem and the qualities that distinguished them from each other. All over the city and over much of India the same retreat on the part of humanity was beginning, into cellars, up hills, under trees. April, herald of horrors, is at hand. The sun was returning to his kingdom with power but without beauty--that was the sinister feature. If only there had been beauty! His cruelty would have been tolerable then. Through excess of light, he failed to triumph, he also; in his yellowy-white overflow not only matter, but brightness itself lay drowned. He was not the unattainable friend, either of men or birds or other suns, he was not the eternal promise, the never-withdrawn suggestion that haunts our consciousness; he was merely a creature, like the rest, and so debarred from glory.

CHAPTER XI

Although the Indians had driven off, and Fielding could see his horse standing in a small shed in the corner of the compound, no one troubled to bring it to him. He started to get it himself, but was stopped by a call from the house. Aziz was sitting up in bed, looking dishevelled and sad. "Here's your home," he said sardonically. "Here's the celebrated hospitality of the East. Look at the flies. Look at the chunam coming off the walls. Isn't it jolly? Now I suppose you want to be off, having seen an Oriental interior." "Anyhow, you want to rest." "I can rest the whole day, thanks to worthy Dr. Lal. Major Callendar's spy, I suppose you know, but this time it didn't work. I am allowed to have a slight temperature." "Callendar doesn't trust anyone, English or Indian: that's his character, and I wish you weren't under him; but you are, and that's that." "Before you go, for you are evidently in a great hurry, will you please unlock that drawer? Do you see a piece of brown paper at the top?" "Yes." "Open it." "Who is this?" "She was my wife. You are the first Englishman she has ever come before. Now put her photograph away." He was astonished, as a traveller who suddenly sees, between the stones of the desert, flowers. The flowers have been there all the time, but suddenly he sees them. He tried to look at the photograph, but in itself it was just a woman in a sari, facing the world. He muttered, "Really, I don't know why you pay me this great compliment, Aziz, but I do appreciate it." "Oh, it's nothing, she was not a highly educated woman or even beautiful, but put it away. You would have seen her, so why should you not see her photograph?" "You would have allowed me to see her?" "Why not? I believe in the purdah, but I should have told her you were my brother, and she would have seen you. Hamidullah saw her, and several others." "Did she think they were your brothers?" "Of course not, but the word exists and is convenient. All men are my brothers, and as soon as one behaves as such he may see my wife." "And when the whole world behaves as such, there will be no more purdah?" "It is because you can say and feel such a remark as that, that I show you the photograph," said Aziz gravely. "It is beyond the power of most men. It is because you behave well while I behave badly that I show it you. I never expected you to come back just now when I called you. I thought, 'He has certainly done with me; I have insulted him.' Mr. Fielding, no one can ever realize how much kindness we Indians need, we do not even realize it ourselves. But we know when it has been given. We do not forget, though we may seem to. Kindness, more kindness, and even after that more kindness. I assure you it is the only hope." His voice seemed to arise from a dream. Altering it, yet still deep below his normal surface, he said, "We can't build up India except on what we feel. What is the use of all these reforms, and Conciliation Committees for Mohurram, and shall we cut the tazia short or shall we carry it another route, and Councils of Notables and official parties where the English sneer at our skins?" "It's beginning at the wrong end, isn't it? I know, but institutions and the governments don't." He looked again at the photograph. The lady faced the world at her husband's wish and her own, but how bewildering she found it, the echoing contradictory world! "Put her away, she is of no importance, she is dead," said Aziz gently. "I showed her to you because I have nothing else to show. You may look round the whole of my bungalow now, and empty everything. I have no other secrets, my three children live away with their grandmamma, and that is all." Fielding sat down by the bed, flattered at the trust reposed in him, yet rather sad. He felt old. He wished that he too could be carried away on waves of emotion. The next time they met, Aziz might be cautious and standoffish. He realized this, and it made him sad that he should realize it. Kindness, kindness, and more kindness--yes, that he might supply, but was that really all that the queer nation needed? Did it not also demand an occasional intoxication of the blood? What had he done to deserve this outburst of confidence, and what hostage could he give in exchange? He looked back at his own life. What a poor crop of secrets it had produced! There were things in it that he had shown to no one, but they were so uninteresting, it wasn't worth while lifting a purdah on their account. He'd been in love, engaged to be married, lady broke it off, memories of her and thoughts about her had kept him from other women for a time; then indulgence, followed by repentance and equilibrium. Meagre really except the equilibrium, and Aziz didn't want to have that confided to him--he would have called it "everything ranged coldly on shelves." "I shall not really be intimate with this fellow," Fielding thought, and then "nor with anyone." That was the corollary. And he had to confess that he really didn't mind, that he was

content to help people, and like them as long as they didn't object, and if they objected pass on serenely. Experience can do much, and all that he had learnt in England and Europe was an assistance to him, and helped him towards clarity, but clarity prevented him from experiencing something else. "How did you like the two ladies you met last Thursday?" he asked. Aziz shook his head distastefully. The question reminded him of his rash remark about the Marabar Caves. "How do you like Englishwomen generally?" "Hamidullah liked them in England. Here we never look at them. Oh no, much too careful. Let's talk of something else." "Hamidullah's right: they are much nicer in England. There's something that doesn't suit them out here." Aziz after another silence said, "Why are you not married?" Fielding was pleased that he had asked. "Because I have more or less come through without it," he replied. "I was thinking of telling you a little about myself some day if I can make it interesting enough. The lady I liked wouldn't marry me--that is the main point, but that's fifteen years ago and now means nothing." "But you haven't children." "None." "Excuse the following question: have you any illegitimate children?" "No. I'd willingly tell you if I had." "Then your name will entirely die out." "It must." "Well." He shook his head. "This indifference is what the Oriental will never understand." "I don't care for children." "Caring has nothing to do with it," he said impatiently. "I don't feel their absence, I don't want them weeping around my death-bed and being polite about me afterwards, which I believe is the general notion. I'd far rather leave a thought behind me than a child. Other people can have children. No obligation, with England getting so chock-a-block and overrunning India for jobs." "Why don't you marry Miss Quested?" "Good God! why, the girl's a prig." "Prig, prig? Kindly explain. Isn't that a bad word?" "Oh, I don't know her, but she struck me as one of the more pathetic products of Western education. She depresses me." "But prig, Mr. Fielding? How's that?" "She goes on and on as if she's at a lecture--trying ever so hard to understand India and life, and occasionally taking a note." "I thought her so nice and sincere." "So she probably is," said Fielding, ashamed of his roughness: any suggestion that he should marry always does produce overstatements on the part of the bachelor, and a mental breeze. "But I can't marry her if I wanted to, for she has just become engaged to the City Magistrate." "Has she indeed? I am so glad!" he exclaimed with relief, for this exempted him from the Marabar expedition: he would scarcely be expected to entertain regular Anglo-Indians. "It's the old mother's doing. She was afraid her dear boy would choose for himself, so she brought out the girl on purpose, and flung them together until it happened." "Mrs. Moore did not mention that to me among her plans." "I may have got it wrong--I'm out of club gossip. But anyhow they're engaged to be married." "Yes, you're out of it, my poor chap," he smiled. "No Miss Quested for Mr. Fielding. However, she was not beautiful. She has practically no breasts, if you come to think of it." He smiled too, but found a touch of bad taste in the reference to a lady's breasts. "For the City Magistrate they shall be sufficient perhaps, and he for her. For you I shall arrange a lady with breasts like mangoes. . . ." "No, you won't." "I will not really, and besides your position makes it dangerous for you." His mind had slipped from matrimony to Calcutta. His face grew grave. Fancy if he had persuaded the Principal to accompany him there, and then got him into trouble! And abruptly he took up a new attitude towards his friend, the attitude of the protector who knows the dangers of India and is admonitory. "You can't be too careful in every way, Mr. Fielding; whatever you say or do in this damned country there is always some envious fellow on the lookout. You may be surprised to know that there were at least three spies sitting here when you came to enquire. I was really a good deal upset that you talked in that fashion about God. They will certainly report it." "To whom?" "That's all very well, but you spoke against morality also, and you said you had come to take other people's jobs. All that was very unwise. This is an awful place for scandal. Why, actually one of your own pupils was listening." "Thanks for telling me that; yes, I must try and be more careful. If I'm interested, I'm apt to forget myself. Still, it doesn't do real harm." "But speaking out may get you into trouble." "It's often done so in the past." "There, listen to that! But the end of it might be that you lost your job." "If I do, I do. I shall survive it. I travel light." "Travel light! You are a most extraordinary race," said Aziz, turning away as if he were going to sleep, and immediately turning back again. "Is it your climate, or what?" "Plenty of Indians travel light too--saddhus and such. It's one of the things I admire about your country. Any man can travel light until he has a wife or children. That's part of my case against marriage. I'm a holy man minus the holiness. Hand that on to your three spies, and tell them to put it in their pipes." Aziz was charmed and interested, and turned the new idea over in his mind. So this was why Mr. Fielding and a few others were so fearless! They had nothing to lose. But he himself was rooted in society and Islam. He belonged to a tradition which bound him, and he had brought children into the world, the society of the future. Though he lived so vaguely in this flimsy bungalow, nevertheless he was placed, placed. "I can't be sacked from my job, because my job's Education. I believe in teaching people to be individuals, and to understand other individuals. It's the only thing I do believe in. At Government College, I mix it up with trigonometry, and so on. When I'm a saddhu, I shall mix it up with something else." He concluded his manifesto, and both were silent. The eye-flies became worse than ever and danced close up to their pupils, or crawled into their ears. Fielding hit about wildly. The exercise made him hot, and he got up to go. "You might tell your servant to bring my horse. He doesn't seem to appreciate my Urdu." "I know. I gave him orders not to. Such are the tricks we play on unfortunate Englishmen. Poor Mr. Fielding! But I will release you now. Oh dear! With the exception of yourself and Hamidullah, I have no one to talk to in this place. You like Hamidullah, don't you?" "Very much." "Do you promise to come at once to us when you are in trouble?" "I never can be in trouble." "There goes a queer chap, I trust he won't come to grief," thought Aziz, left alone. His period of admiration was over, and he reacted towards patronage. It was difficult for him to remain in awe of

anyone who played with all his cards on the table. Fielding, he discovered on closer acquaintance, was truly warm-hearted and unconventional, but not what can be called wise. That frankness of speech in the presence of Ram Chand Rafi and Co. was dangerous and inelegant. It served no useful end. But they were friends, brothers. That part was settled, their compact had been subscribed by the photograph, they trusted one another, affection had triumphed for once in a way. He dropped off to sleep amid the happier memories of the last two hours--poetry of Ghalib, female grace, good old Hamidullah, good Fielding, his honoured wife and dear boys. He passed into a region where these joys had no enemies but bloomed harmoniously in an eternal garden, or ran down watershoots of ribbed marble, or rose into domes whereunder were inscribed, black against white, the ninety-nine attributes of God.

PART II: CAVES

CHAPTER XII

The Ganges, though flowing from the foot of Vishnu and through Siva's hair, is not an ancient stream. Geology, looking further than religion, knows of a time when neither the river nor the Himalayas that nourished it existed, and an ocean flowed over the holy places of Hindustan. The mountains rose, their debris silted up the ocean, the gods took their seats on them and contrived the river, and the India we call immemorial came into being. But India is really far older. In the days of the prehistoric ocean the southern part of the peninsula already existed, and the high places of Dravidia have been land since land began, and have seen on the one side the sinking of a continent that joined them to Africa, and on the other the upheaval of the Himalayas from a sea. They are older than anything in the world. No water has ever covered them, and the sun who has watched them for countless aeons may still discern in their outlines forms that were his before our globe was torn from his bosom. If flesh of the sun's flesh is to be touched anywhere, it is here, among the incredible antiquity of these hills. Yet even they are altering. As Himalayan India rose, this India, the primal, has been depressed, and is slowly re-entering the curve of the earth. It may be that in aeons to come an ocean will flow here too, and cover the sun-born rocks with slime. Meanwhile the plain of the Ganges encroaches on them with something of the sea's action. They are sinking beneath the newer lands. Their main mass is untouched, but at the edge their outposts have been cut off and stand knee-deep, throat-deep, in the advancing soil. There is something unspeakable in these outposts. They are like nothing else in the world, and a glimpse of them makes the breath catch. They rise abruptly, insanely, without the proportion that is kept by the wildest hills elsewhere, they bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen. To call them "uncanny" suggests ghosts, and they are older than all spirit. Hinduism has scratched and plastered a few rocks, but the shrines are unfrequented, as if pilgrims, who generally seek the extraordinary, had here found too much of it. Some saddhus did once settle in a cave, but they were smoked out, and even Buddha, who must have passed this way down to the Bo Tree of Gya, shunned a renunciation more complete than his own, and has left no legend of struggle or victory in the Marabar. The caves are readily described. A tunnel eight feet long, five feet high, three feet wide, leads to a circular chamber about twenty feet in diameter. This arrangement occurs again and again throughout the group of hills, and this is all, this is a Marabar Cave. Having seen one such cave, having seen two, having seen three, four, fourteen, twenty-four, the visitor returns to Chandrapore uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all. He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind, for the pattern never varies, and no carving, not even a bees'-nest or a bat distinguishes one from another. Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation--for they have one--does not depend upon human speech. It is as if the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim "extraordinary," and the word has taken root in the air, and been inhaled by mankind. They are dark caves. Even when they open towards the sun, very little light penetrates down the entrance tunnel into the circular chamber. There is little to see, and no eye to see it, until the visitor arrives for his five minutes, and strikes a match. Immediately another flame rises in the depths of the rock and moves towards the surface like an imprisoned spirit: the walls of the circular chamber have been most marvellously polished. The two flames approach and strive to unite, but cannot, because one of them breathes air, the other stone. A mirror inlaid with lovely colours divides the lovers, delicate stars of pink and grey interpose, exquisite nebulae, shadings fainter than the tail of a comet or the midday moon, all the evanescent life of the granite, only here visible. Fists and fingers thrust above the advancing soil--here at last is their skin, finer than any covering acquired by the animals, smoother than windless water, more voluptuous than love. The radiance increases, the flames touch one another, kiss, expire. The cave is dark again, like all the caves. Only the wall of the circular chamber has been polished thus. The sides of the tunnel are left rough, they impinge as an afterthought upon the internal perfection. An entrance was necessary, so mankind made one. But elsewhere, deeper in the granite, are there certain chambers that have no entrances? Chambers never unsealed since the arrival of the gods. Local report declares that these exceed in number those that can be visited, as the dead exceed the living--four hundred of them, four thousand or million. Nothing is inside them, they were sealed up before the creation of pestilence or treasure; if mankind grew curious and excavated, nothing, nothing would be added to the sum of good or evil. One of them is rumoured within the boulder that swings on the summit of the highest of the hills; a bubble-shaped cave that has neither ceiling nor floor, and mirrors

its own darkness in every direction infinitely. If the boulder falls and smashes, the cave will smash too--empty as an Easter egg. The boulder because of its hollowness sways in the wind, and even moves when a crow perches upon it: hence its name and the name of its stupendous pedestal: the Kawa Dol.

CHAPTER XIII

These hills look romantic in certain lights and at suitable distances, and seen of an evening from the upper verandah of the club they caused Miss Quested to say conversationally to Miss Derek that she should like to have gone, that Dr. Aziz at Mr. Fielding's had said he would arrange something, and that Indians seem rather forgetful. She was overheard by the servant who offered them vermouths. This servant understood English. And he was not exactly a spy, but he kept his ears open, and Mahmoud Ali did not exactly bribe him, but did encourage him to come and squat with his own servants, and would happen to stroll their way when he was there. As the story travelled, it accreted emotion and Aziz learnt with horror that the ladies were deeply offended with him, and had expected an invitation daily. He thought his facile remark had been forgotten. Endowed with two memories, a temporary and a permanent, he had hitherto relegated the caves to the former. Now he transferred them once for all, and pushed the matter through. They were to be a stupendous replica of the tea party. He began by securing Fielding and old Godbole, and then commissioned Fielding to approach Mrs.. Moore and Miss Quested when they were alone--by this device Ronny, their official protector, could be circum vented. Fielding didn't like the job much; he was busy, caves bored him, he foresaw friction and expense, but he would not refuse the first favour his friend had asked from him, and did as required. The ladies accepted. It was a little inconvenient in the present press of their engagements, still, they hoped to manage it after consulting Mr. Heaslop. Consulted, Ronny raised no objection, provided Fielding undertook full responsibility for their comfort. He was not enthusiastic about the picnic, but, then, no more were the ladies--no one was enthusiastic, yet it took place. Aziz was terribly worried. It was not a long expedition--a train left Chandrapore just before dawn, another would bring them back for tiffin--but he was only a little official still, and feared to acquit himself dishonourably. He had to ask Major Callendar for half a day's leave, and be refused because of his recent malingering; despair; renewed approach of Major Callendar through Fielding, and contemptuous snarling permission. He had to borrow cutlery from Mahmoud Ali without inviting him. Then there was the question of alcohol; Mr. Fielding, and perhaps the ladies, were drinkers, so must he provide whisky-sodas and ports? There was the problem of transport from the wayside station of Marabar to the caves. There was the problem of Professor Godbole and his food, and of Professor Godbole and other people's food--two problems, not one problem. The Professor was not a very strict Hindu--he would take tea, fruit, soda-water and sweets, whoever cooked them, and vegetables and rice if cooked by a Brahman; but not meat, not cakes lest they contained eggs, and he would not allow anyone else to eat beef: a slice of beef upon a distant plate would wreck his happiness. Other people might eat mutton, they might eat ham. But over ham Aziz' own religion raised its voice: he did not fancy other people eating ham. Trouble after trouble encountered him, because he had challenged the spirit of the Indian earth, which tries to keep men in compartments. At last the moment arrived. His friends thought him most unwise to mix himself up with English ladies, and warned him to take every precaution against unpunctuality. Consequently he spent the previous night at the station. The servants were huddled on the platform, enjoined not to stray. He himself walked up and down with old Mohammed Latif, who was to act as major-domo. He felt insecure and also unreal. A car drove up, and he hoped Fielding would get out of it, to lend him solidity. But it contained Mrs. Moore, Miss Quested, and their Goanese servant. He rushed to meet them, suddenly happy. "But you've come, after all. Oh, how very very kind of you!" he cried. "This is the happiest moment in all my life." The ladies were civil. It was not the happiest moment in their lives, still, they looked forward to enjoying themselves as soon as the bother of the early start was over. They had not seen him since the expedition was arranged, and they thanked him adequately. "You don't require tickets--please stop your servant. There are no tickets on the Marabar branch line; it is its peculiarity. You come to the carriage and rest till Mr. Fielding joins us. Did you know you are to travel purdah? Will you like that?" They replied that they should like it. The train had come in, and a crowd of dependents were swarming over the seats of the carriage like monkeys. Aziz had borrowed servants from his friends, as well as bringing his own three, and quarrels over precedence were resulting. The ladies' servant stood apart, with a sneering expression on his face. They had hired him while they were still globe-trotters, at Bombay. In a hotel or among smart people he was excellent, but as soon as they consorted with anyone whom he thought second-rate he left them to their disgrace. The night was still dark, but had acquired the temporary look that indicates its end. Perched on the roof of a shed, the station-master's hens began to dream of kites instead of owls. Lamps were put out, in order to save the trouble of putting them out later; the smell of tobacco and the sound of spitting arose from third-class passengers in dark corners; heads were unshrouded, teeth cleaned on the twigs of a tree. So convinced was a junior official that another sun would rise, that he rang a bell with enthusiasm. This upset the servants. They shrieked that the train was starting, and ran to both ends of it to intercede. Much had still to enter the purdah carriage-- a box bound with brass, a melon wearing a fez, a towel containing guavas, a step-ladder and a gun. The guests played up all right. They had no race-consciousness-- Mrs. Moore was too old, Miss Quested too new--and they behaved to Aziz as to any young man who had been kind to them in the country. This moved him deeply. He had

expected them to arrive with Mr. Fielding, instead of which they trusted themselves to be with him a few moments alone. "Send back your servant," he suggested. "He is unnecessary. Then we shall all be Moslems together." "And he is such a horrible servant. Antony, you can go; we don't want you," said the girl impatiently. "Master told me to come." "Mistress tells you to go." "Master says, keep near the ladies all the morning." "Well, your ladies won't have you." She turned to the host. "Do get rid of him, Dr. Aziz!" "Mohammed Latif!" he called. The poor relative exchanged fezzes with the melon, and peeped out of the window of the railway carriage, whose confusion he was superintending. "Here is my cousin, Mr. Mohammed Latif. Oh no, don't shake hands. He is an Indian of the old-fashioned sort, he prefers to salaam. There, I told you so. Mohammed Latif, how beautifully you salaam. See, he hasn't understood; he knows no English." "You spick lie," said the old man gently. "I spick a lie! Oh, jolly good. Isn't he a funny old man? We will have great jokes with him later. He does all sorts of little things. He is not nearly as stupid as you think, and awfully poor. It's lucky ours is a large family." He flung an arm round the grubby neck. "But you get inside, make yourselves at home; yes, you lie down." The celebrated Oriental confusion appeared at last to be at an end. "Excuse me, now I must meet our other two guests!" He was getting nervous again, for it was ten minutes to the time. Still, Fielding was an Englishman, and they never do miss trains, and Godbole was a Hindu and did not count, and, soothed by this logic, he grew calmer as the hour of departure approached. Mohammed Latif had bribed Antony not to come. They walked up and down the platform, talking usefully. They agreed that they had overdone the servants, and must leave two or three behind at Marabar station. And Aziz explained that he might be playing one or two practical jokes at the caves-- not out of unkindness, but to make the guests laugh. The old man assented with slight sideway motions of the head: he was always willing to be ridiculed, and he bade Aziz not spare him. Elated by his importance, he began an indecent anecdote. "Tell me another time, brother, when I have more leisure, for now, as I have already explained, we have to give pleasure to non-Moslems. Three will be Europeans, one a Hindu, which must not be forgotten. Every attention must be paid to Professor Godbole, lest he feel that he is inferior to my other guests." "I will discuss philosophy with him." "That will be kind of you; but the servants are even more important. We must not convey an impression of disorganization. It can be done, and I expect you to do it . . ." A shriek from the purdah carriage. The train had started. "Merciful God!" cried Mohammed Latif. He flung himself at the train, and leapt on to the footboard of a carriage. Aziz did likewise. It was an easy feat, for a branch-line train is slow to assume special airs. "We're monkeys, don't worry," he called, hanging on to a bar and laughing. Then he howled, "Mr. Fielding! Mr. Fielding!" There were Fielding and old Godbole, held up at the level-crossing. Appalling catastrophe! The gates had been closed earlier than usual. They leapt from their tonga; they gesticulated, but what was the good. So near and yet so far! As the train joggled past over the points, there was time for agonized words. "Bad, bad, you have destroyed me." "Godbole's pujah did it," cried the Englishman. The Brahman lowered his eyes, ashamed of religion. For it was so: he had miscalculated the length of a prayer. "Jump on, I must have you," screamed Aziz, beside himself. "Right, give a hand." "He's not to, he'll kill himself," Mrs. Moore protested. He jumped, he failed, missed his friend's hand, and fell back on to the line. The train rumbled past. He scrambled on to his feet, and bawled after them, "I'm all right, you're all right, don't worry," and then they passed beyond range of his voice. "Mrs. Moore, Miss Quested, our expedition is a ruin." He swung himself along the footboard, almost in tears. "Get in, get in; you'll kill yourself as well as Mr. Fielding. I see no ruin." "How is that? Oh, explain to me!" he said piteously, like a child. "We shall be all Moslems together now, as you promised." She was perfect as always, his dear Mrs. Moore. All the love for her he had felt at the mosque welled up again, the fresher for forgetfulness. There was nothing he would not do for her. He would die to make her happy. "Get in, Dr. Aziz, you make us giddy," the other lady called. "If they're so foolish as to miss the train, that's their loss, not ours." "I am to blame. I am the host." "Nonsense, go to your carriage. We're going to have a delightful time without them." Not perfect like Mrs. Moore, but very sincere and kind. Wonderful ladies, both of them, and for one precious morning his guests. He felt important and competent. Fielding was a loss personally, being a friend, increasingly dear, yet if Fielding had come, he himself would have remained in leading-strings. "Indians are incapable of responsibility," said the officials, and Hamidullah sometimes said so too. He would show those pessimists that they were wrong. Smiling proudly, he glanced outward at the country, which was still invisible except as a dark movement in the darkness; then upwards at the sky, where the stars of the sprawling Scorpion had begun to pale. Then he dived through a window into a secondclass carriage. "Mohammed Latif, by the way, what is in these caves, brother? Why are we all going to see them?" Such a question was beyond the poor relative's scope. He could only reply that God and the local villagers knew, and that the latter would gladly act as guides.

CHAPTER XIV

Most of life is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it, and the books and talk that would describe it as interesting are obliged to exaggerate, in the hope of justifying their own existence. Inside its cocoon of work or social obligation, the human spirit slumbers for the most part, registering the distinction between pleasure and pain, but not nearly as alert as we pretend. There are periods in the most thrilling day during which nothing happens, and though we continue to exclaim, "I do enjoy myself," or, "I am horrified," we are

insincere. "As far as I feel anything, it is enjoyment, horror"--it's no more than that really, and a perfectly adjusted organism would be silent. It so happened that Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested had felt nothing acutely for a fortnight. Ever since Professor Godbole had sung his queer little song, they had lived more or less inside cocoons, and the difference between them was that the elder lady accepted her own apathy, while the younger resented hers. It was Adela's faith that the whole stream of events is important and interesting, and if she grew bored she blamed herself severely and compelled her lips to utter enthusiasms. This was the only insincerity in a character otherwise sincere, and it was indeed the intellectual protest of her youth. She was particularly vexed now because she was both in India and engaged to be married, which double event should have made every instant sublime. India was certainly dim this morning, though seen under the auspices of Indians. Her wish had been granted, but too late. She could not get excited over Aziz and his arrangements. She was not the least unhappy or depressed, and the various odd objects that surrounded her--the comic "purdah" carriage, the piles of rugs and bolsters, the rolling melons, the scent of sweet oils, the ladder, the brass-bound box, the sudden irruption of Mahmoud Ali's butler from the lavatory with tea and poached eggs upon a tray--they were all new and amusing, and led her to comment appropriately, but they wouldn't bite into her mind. So she tried to find comfort by reflecting that her main interest would hence forward be Ronny. "What a nice cheerful servant! What a relief after Antony!" "They startle one rather. A strange place to make tea in," said Mrs. Moore, who had hoped for a nap. "I want to sack Antony. His behaviour on the platform has decided me." Mrs. Moore thought that Antony's better self would come to the front at Simla. Miss Quested was to be married at Simla; some cousins, with a house looking straight on to Thibet, had invited her. "Anyhow, we must get a second servant, because at Simla you will be at the hotel, and I don't think Ronny's Baldeo . . ." She loved plans. "Very well, you get another servant, and I'll keep Antony with me. I am used to his unappetizing ways. He will see me through the Hot Weather." "I don't believe in the Hot Weather. People like Major Callendar who always talk about it--it's in the hope of making one feel inexperienced and small, like their everlasting, 'I've been twenty years in this country.' "I believe in the Hot Weather, but never did I suppose it would bottle me up as it will." For owing to the sage leisureliness of Ronny and Adela, they could not be married till May, and consequently Mrs. Moore could not return to England immediately after the wedding, which was what she had hoped to do. By May a barrier of fire would have fallen across India and the adjoining sea, and she would have to remain perched up in the Himalayas waiting for the world to get cooler. "I won't be bottled up," announced the girl. "I've no patience with these women here who leave their husbands grilling in the plains. Mrs. McBryde hasn't stopped down once since she married; she leaves her quite intelligent husband alone half the year, and then's surprised she's out of touch with him." "She has children, you see." "Oh yes, that's true," said Miss Quested, disconcerted. "It is the children who are the first consideration. Until they are grown up, and married off. When that happens one has again the right to live for oneself--in the plains or the hills, as suits." "Oh yes, you're perfectly right. I never thought it out." "If one has not become too stupid and old." She handed her empty cup to the servant. "My idea now is that my cousins shall find me a servant in Simla, at all events to see me through the wedding, after which Ronny means to reorganize his staff entirely. He does it very well for a bachelor; still, when he is married no doubt various changes will have to be made--his old servants won't want to take their orders from me, and I don't blame them." Mrs. Moore pushed up the shutters and looked out. She had brought Ronny and Adela together by their mutual wish, but really she could not advise them further. She felt increasingly (vision or nightmare?) that, though people are important, the relations between them are not, and that in particular too much fuss has been made over marriage; centuries of carnal embracement, yet man is no nearer to understanding man. And to-day she felt this with such force that it seemed itself a relationship, itself a person who was trying to take hold of her hand. "Anything to be seen of the hills?" "Only various shades of the dark." "We can't be far from the place where my hyena was." She peered into the timeless twilight. The train crossed a nullah. "Pomper, pomper, pomper," was the sound that the wheels made as they trundled over the bridge, moving very slowly. A hundred yards on came a second nullah, then a third, suggesting the neighbourhood of higher ground. "Perhaps this is mine; anyhow, the road runs parallel with the railway." Her accident was a pleasant memory; she felt in her dry, honest way that it had given her a good shake up, and taught her Ronny's true worth. Then she went back to her plans; plans had been a passion with her from girlhood. Now and then she paid tribute to the present, said how friendly and intelligent Aziz was, ate a guava, couldn't eat a fried sweet, practised her Urdu on the servant; but her thoughts ever veered to the manageable future, and to the AngloIndian life she had decided to endure. And as she appraised it with its adjuncts of Turtons and Burtons, the train accompanied her sentences, "pomper, pomper," the train half asleep, going nowhere in particular and with no passenger of importance in any of its carriages, the branch-line train, lost on a low embankment between dull fields. Its message--for it had one--avoided her wellequipped mind. Far away behind her, with a shriek that meant business, rushed the Mail, connecting up important towns such as Calcutta and Lahore, where interesting events occur and personalities are developed. She understood that. Unfortunately, India has few important towns. India is the country, fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills, and more fields. The branch line stops, the road is only practicable for cars to a point, the bullockcarts lumber down the side tracks, paths fray out into the cultivation, and disappear near a splash of red paint. How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows of their trouble.

She knows of the whole world's trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls "Come" through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal. "I will fetch you from Simla when it's cool enough. I will unbottle you in fact," continued the reliable girl. "We then see some of the Mogul stuff--how appalling if we let you miss the Taj!--and then I will see you off at Bombay. Your last glimpse of this country really shall be interesting." But Mrs. Moore had fallen asleep, exhausted by the early start. She was in rather low health, and ought not to have attempted the expedition, but had pulled herself together in case the pleasure of the others should suffer. Her dreams were of the same texture, but there it was her other children who were wanting something, Stella and Ralph, and she was explaining to them that she could not be in two families at once. When she awoke, Adela had ceased to plan, and leant out of a window, saying, "They're rather wonderful." Astonishing even from the rise of the civil station, here the Marabar were gods to whom earth is a ghost. Kawa Do! was nearest. It shot up in a single slab, on whose summit one rock was poised--if a mass so great can be called one rock. Behind it, recumbent, were the hills that contained the other caves, isolated each from his neighbour by broad channels of the plain. The assemblage, ten in all, shifted a little as the train crept past them, as if observing its arrival. "I'ld not have missed this for anything," said the girl, exaggerating her enthusiasm. "Look, the sun's rising-- this'll be absolutely magnificent--come quickly--look. I wouldn't have missed this for anything. We should never have seen it if we'd stuck to the Turtons and their eternal elephants." As she spoke, the sky to the left turned angry orange. Colour throbbed and mounted behind a pattern of trees, grew in intensity, was yet brighter, incredibly brighter, strained from without against the globe of the air. They awaited the miracle. But at the supreme moment, when night should have died and day lived, nothing occurred. It was as if virtue had failed in the celestial fount. The hues in the east decayed, the hills seemed dimmer though in fact better lit, and a profound disappointment entered with the morning breeze. Why, when the chamber was prepared, did the bridegroom not enter with trumpets and shawms, as humanity expects? The sun rose without splendour. He was presently observed trailing yellowish behind the trees, or against insipid sky, and touching the bodies already at work in the fields. "Ah, that must be the false dawn--isn't it caused by dust in the upper layers of the atmosphere that couldn't fall down during the night? I think Mr. McBryde said so. Well, I must admit that England has it as regards sunrises. Do you remember Grasmere?" "Ah, dearest Grasmere!" Its little lakes and mountains were beloved by them all. Romantic yet manageable, it sprang from a kindlier planet. Here an untidy plain stretched to the knees of the Marabar. "Good morning, good morning, put on your topis," shouted Aziz from farther down the train. "Put on your topis at once, the early sun is highly dangerous for heads. I speak as a doctor." "Good morning, good morning, put on your own." "Not for my thick head," he laughed, banging it and holding up pads of his hair. "Nice creature he is," murmured Adela. "Listen--Mohammed Latif says 'Good morning' next." Various pointless jests. "Dr. Aziz, what's happened to your hills? The train has forgotten to stop." "Perhaps it is a circular train and goes back to Chandrapore without a break. Who knows!" Having wandered off into the plain for a mile, the train slowed up against an elephant. There was a platform too, but it shrivelled into insignificance. An elephant, waving her painted forehead at the morn! "Oh, what a surprise!" called the ladies politely. Aziz said nothing, but he nearly burst with pride and relief. The elephant was the one grand feature of the picnic, and God alone knew what he had gone through to obtain her. Semi-official, she was best approached through the Nawab Bahadur, who was best approached through Nureddin, but he never answered letters, but his mother had great influence with him and was a friend of Hamidulhah Begum's, who had been excessively kind and had promised to call on her provided the broken shutter of the purdah carriage came back soon enough from Calcutta. That an elephant should depend from so long and so slender a string filled Aziz with content, and with humorous appreciation of the East, where the friends of friends are a reality, where everything gets done sometime, and sooner or later every one gets his share of happiness. And Mohammed Latif was likewise content, because two of the guests had missed the train, and consequently he could ride on the howdah instead of following in a cart, and the servants were content because an elephant increased their self-esteem, and they tumbled out the luggage into the dust with shouts and bangs, issuing orders to one another, and convulsed with goodwill. "It takes an hour to get there, an hour to get back, and two hours for the caves, which we will call three," said Aziz, smiling charmingly. There was suddenly something regal about him. "The train back is at eleventhirty, and you will be sitting down to your tiffin in Chandrapore with Mr. Heaslop at exactly your usual hour, namely, one-fifteen. I know everything about you. Four hours--quite a small expedition--and an hour extra for misfortunes, which occur somewhat frequently among my people. My idea is to plan everything without consulting you; but you, Mrs. Moore, or Miss Quested, you are at any moment to make alterations if you wish, even if it means giving up the caves. Do you agree? Then mount this wild animal." The elephant had knelt, grey and isolated, like another hill. They climbed up the ladder, and he mounted shikar fashion, treading first on the sharp edge of the heel and then into the looped-up tail. When Mohammed Latif followed him, the servant who held the end of the tail let go of it according to previous instructions, so that the poor relative slipped and had to cling to the netting over the buttocks. It was a little piece of Court buffoonery, and distressed only the ladies, whom it was intended to divert. Both of them disliked practical jokes. Then the beast rose in two shattering movements, and poised them ten feet above the plain. Immediately below was the scurf of life that an elephant always collects round its feet--villagers, naked babies. The servants flung crockery into tongas. Hassan annexed the stallion intended for Aziz, and defied Mahmoud Ali's man from its altitude. The Brahrnan who had been hired to cook for

Professor Godbole was planted under an acacia tree, to await their return. The train, also hoping to return, wobbled away through the fields, turning its head this way and that like a centipede. And the only other movement to be seen was a movement as of antennae, really the counterpoises of the wells which rose and fell on their pivots of mud all over the plain and dispersed a feeble flow of water. The scene was agreeable rather than not in the mild morning air, but there was little colour in it, and no vitality. As the elephant moved towards the hills (the pale sun had by this time saluted them to the base, and pencilled shadows down their creases) a new quality occurred, a spiritual silence which invaded more senses than the ear. Life went on as usual, but had no consequences, that is to say, sounds did not echo or thoughts develop. Everything seemed cut off at its root, and therefore infected with illusion. For instance, there were some mounds by the edge of the track, low, serrated, and touched with whitewash. What were these mounds--graves, breasts of the goddess Parvati? The villagers beneath gave both replies. Again, there was a confusion about a snake which was never cleared up. Miss Quested saw a thin, dark object reared on end at the farther side of a watercourse, and said, "A snake!" The villagers agreed, and Aziz explained: yes, a black cobra, very venomous, who had reared himself up to watch the passing of the elephant. But when she looked through Ronny's fieldglasses, she found it wasn't a snake, but the withered and twisted stump of a toddy-palm. So she said, "It isn't a snake." The villagers contradicted her. She had put the word into their minds, and they refused to abandon it. Aziz admitted that it looked like a tree through the glasses, but insisted that it was a black cobra really, and improvised some rubbish about protective mimicry. Nothing was explained, and yet there was no romance. Films of heat, radiated from the Kawa Dol precipices, increased the confusion. They came at irregular intervals and moved capriciously. A patch of field would jump as if it was being fried, and then lie quiet. As they drew closer the radiation stopped. The elephant walked straight at the Kawa Dol as if she would knock for admission with her forehead, then swerved, and followed a path round its base. The stones plunged straight into the earth, like cliffs into the sea, and while Miss Quested was remarking on this, and saying that it was striking, the plain quietly disappeared, peeled off, so to speak, and nothing was to be seen on either side but the granite, very dead and quiet. The sky dominated as usual, but seemed unhealthily near, adhering like a ceiling to the summits of the precipices. It was as if the contents of the corridor had never been changed. Occupied by his own munificence, Aziz noticed nothing. His guests noticed a little. They did not feel that it was an attractive place or quite worth visiting, and wished it could have turned into some Mohammedan object, such as a mosque, which their host would have appreciated and explained. His ignorance became evident, and was really rather a drawback. In spite of his gay, confident talk, he had no notion how to treat this particular aspect of India; he was lost in it without Professor Godbole, like themselves. The corridor narrowed, then widened into a sort of tray. Here, more or less, was their goal. A ruined tank held a little water which would do for the animals, and close above the mud was punched a black hole--the first of the caves. Three hills encircled the tray. Two of them pumped out heat busily, but the third was in shadow, and here they camped. "A horrid, stuffy place really," murmured Mrs. Moore to herself. "How quick your servants are!" Miss Quested exclaimed. For a cloth had already been laid, with a vase of artificial flowers in its centre, and Mahmoud Ali's butler offered them poached eggs and tea for the second time. "I thought we would eat this before our caves, and breakfast after." "Isn't this breakfast?" "This breakfast? Did you think I should treat you so strangely?" He had been warned that English people never stop eating, and that he had better nourish them every two hours until a solid meal was ready. "How very well it is all arranged." "That you shall tell me when I return to Chandrapore. Whatever disgraces I bring upon myself, you remain my guests." He spoke gravely now. They were dependent on him for a few hours, and he felt grateful to them for placing themselves in such a position. All was well so far; the elephant held a fresh cut bough to her lips, the tonga shafts stuck up into the air, the kitchen-boy peeled potatoes, Hassan shouted, and Mohammed Latif stood as he ought, with a peeled switch in his hand. The expedition was a success, and it was Indian; an obscure young man had been allowed to show courtesy to visitors from another country, which is what all Indians long to do-- even cynics like Mahmoud Ali--but they never have the chance. Hospitality had been achieved, they were "his" guests; his honour was involved in their happiness, and any discomfort they endured would tear his own soul. Like most Orientals, Aziz overrated hospitality, mistaking it for intimacy, and not seeing that it is tainted with the sense of possession. It was only when Mrs. Moore or Fielding was near him that he saw further, and knew that it is more blessed to receive than to give. These two had strange and beautiful effects on him-they were his friends, his for ever, and he theirs for ever; he loved them so much that giving and receiving became one. He loved them even better than the Hamidullah's because he had surmounted obstacles to meet them, and this stimulates a generous mind. Their images remained somewhere in his soul up to his dying day, permanent additions. He looked at her now as she sat on a deckchair, sipping his tea, and had for a moment a joy that held the seeds of its own decay, for it would lead him to think, "Oh, what more can I do for her?" and so back to the dull round of hospitality. The black bullets of his eyes filled with soft expressive light, and he said, "Do you ever remember our mosque, Mrs. Moore?" "I do. I do," she said, suddenly vital and young. "And how rough and rude I was, and how good you were." "And how happy we both were." "Friendships last longest that begin like that, I think. Shall I ever entertain your other children?" "Do you know about the others? She will never talk about them to me," said Miss Quested, unintentionally breaking a spell. "Ralph and Stella, yes, I know everything about them. But we must not forget to visit our caves. One of the dreams of my life is accomplished in having you both here as my guests. You cannot

imagine how you have honoured me. I feel like the Emperor Babur." "Why like him?" she enquired, rising. "Because my ancestors came down with him from Afghanistan. They joined him at Herat. He also had often no more elephants than one, none sometimes, but he never ceased showing hospitality. When he fought or hunted or ran away, he would always stop for a time among hills, just like us; he would never let go of hospitality and pleasure, and if there was only a little food, he would have it arranged nicely, and if only one musical instrument, he would compel it to play a beautiful tune. I take him as my ideal. He is the poor gentleman, and he became a great king." "I thought another Emperor is your favourite--I forget the name--you mentioned him at Mr. Fielding's: what my book calls Aurangzebe." "Alamgir? Oh yes, he was of course the more pious. But Babur--never in his whole life did he betray a friend, so I can only think of him this morning. And you know how he died? He laid down his life for his son. A death far more difficult than battle. They were caught in the heat. They should have gone back to Kabul for the bad weather, but could not for reasons of state, and at Agra Humayun fell sick. Babur walked round the bed three times, and said, 'I have borne it away,' and he did bear it away; the fever left his son and came to him instead, and he died. That is why I prefer Babur to Alamgir. I ought not to do so, but I do. However, I mustn't delay you. I see you are ready to start." "Not at all," she said, sitting down by Mrs. Moore again. "We enjoy talk like this very much." For at last he was talking about what he knew and felt, talking as he had in Fielding's garden-house; he was again the Oriental guide whom they appreciated. "I always enjoy conversing about the Moguls. It is the chief pleasure I know. You see, those first six emperors were all most wonderful men, and as soon as one of them is mentioned, no matter which, I forget everything else in the world except the other five. You could not find six such kings in all the countries of the earth, not, I mean, coming one after the other--father, son." "Tell us something about Akbar." "Ah, you have heard the name of Akbar. Good. Hamidullah--whom you shall meet--will tell you that Akbar is the greatest of all. I say, 'Yes, Akbar is very wonderful, but half a Hindu; he was not a true Moslem,' which makes Hamidullah cry, 'No more was Babur, he drank wine.' But Babur always repented afterwards, which makes the entire difference, and Akbar never repented of the new religion he invented instead of the Holy Koran." "But wasn't Akbar's new religion very fine? It was to embrace the whole of India." "Miss Quested, fine but foolish. You keep your religion, I mine. That is the best. Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing, and that was Akbar's mistake." "Oh, do you feel that, Dr. Aziz?" she said thoughtfully. "I hope you're not right. There will have to be something universal in this country--I don't say religion, for I'm not religious, but something, or how else are barriers to be broken down?" She was only recommending the universal brotherhood he sometimes dreamed of, but as soon as it was put into prose it became untrue. "Take my own case," she continued--it was indeed her own case that had animated her. " I don't know whether you happen to have heard, but I'm going to marry Mr. Heaslop." "On which my heartiest congratulations." "Mrs. Moore, may I put our difficulty to Dr. Aziz--I mean our Anglo-Indian one?" "It is your difficulty, not mine, my dear." "Ah, that's true. Well, by marrying Mr. Heaslop, I shall become what is known as an Anglo-Indian." He held up his hand in protest. "Impossible. Take back such a terrible remark." "But I shall! it's inevitable. I can't avoid the label. What I do hope to avoid is the mentality. Women like--" She stopped, not quite liking to mention names; she would boldly have said "Mrs. Turton and Mrs. Callendar" a fortnight ago. "Some women are so--well, ungenerous and snobby about Indians, and I should feel too ashamed for words if I turned like them, but--and here's my difficulty--there's nothing special about me, nothing specially good or strong, which will help me to resist my environment and avoid becoming like them. I've most lamentable defects. That's why I want Akbar's 'universal religion' or the equivalent to keep me decent and sensible. Do you see what I mean?" Her remarks pleased him, but his mind shut up tight because she had alluded to her marriage. He was not going to be mixed up in that side of things. "You are certain to be happy with any relative of Mrs. Moore's," he said with a formal bow. "Oh, my happiness--that's quite another problem. I want to consult you about this Anglo-Indian difficulty. Can you give me any advice?" "You are absolutely unlike the others, I assure you. You will never be rude to my people." "I am told we all get rude after a year." "Then you are told a lie," he flashed, for she had spoken the truth and it touched him on the raw; it was itself an insult in these particular circumstances. He recovered himself at once and laughed, but her error broke up their conversation--their civilization it had almost been--which scattered like the petals of a desert flower, and left them in the middle of the hills. "Come along," he said, holding out a hand to each. They got up a little reluctantly, and addressed themselves to sightseeing. The first cave was tolerably convenient. They skirted the puddle of water, and then climbed up over some unattractive stones, the sun crashing on their backs. Bending their heads, they disappeared one by one into the interior of the hills. The small black hole gaped where their varied forms and colours had momentarily functioned. They were sucked in like water down a drain. Bland and bald rose the precipices; bland and glutinous the sky that connected the precipices; solid and white, a Brahminy kite flapped between the rocks with a clumsiness that seemed intentional. Before man, with his itch for the seemly, had been born, the planet must have looked thus. The kite flapped away. . . . Before birds, perhaps. . . . And then the hole belched and humanity returned. A Marabar cave had been horrid as far as Mrs Moore was concerned, for she had nearly fainted in it, and had some difficulty in preventing herself from saying so as soon as she got into the air again. It was natural enough: she had always suffered from faintness, and the cave had become too full, because all their retinue followed them. Crammed with villagers and servants, the circular chamber began to smell. She lost Aziz and Adela in the dark, didn't know who touched her, couldn't breathe, and some vile naked thing struck her face and settled on her mouth

like a pad. She tried to regain the entrance tunnel, but an influx of villagers swept her back. She hit her head. For an instant she went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic. For not only did the crush and stench alarm her; there was also a terrifying echo. Professor Godbole had never mentioned an echo; it never impressed him, perhaps. There are some exquisite echoes in India; there is the whisper round the dome at Bijapur; there are the long, solid sentences that voyage through the air at Mandu, and return unbroken to their creator. The echo in a Marabar cave is not like these, it is entirely devoid of distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof. "Bourn" is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or "bou-ourn," or "ou-boum,"--utterly dull. Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce "bourn." Even the striking of a match starts a little worm coiling, which is too small to complete a circle but is eternally watchful. And if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently. After Mrs. Moore all the others poured out. She had given the signal for the reflux. Aziz and Adela both emerged smiling and she did not want him to think his treat was a failure, so smiled too. As each person emerged she looked for a villain, but none was there, and she realized that she had been among the mildest individuals, whose only desire was to honour her, and that the naked pad was a poor little baby, astride its mother's hip. Nothing evil had been in the cave, but she had not enjoyed herself; no, she had not enjoyed herself, and she decided not to visit a second one. "Did you see the reflection of his match--rather pretty?" asked Adela. "I forget . . ." "But he says this isn't a good cave, the best are on the Kawa Dol." "I don't think I shall go on to there. I dislike climbing." "Very well, let's sit down again in the shade until breakfast's ready." "Ah, but that'll disappoint him so; he has taken such trouble. You should go on; you don't mind." "Perhaps I ought to," said the girl, indifferent to what she did, but desirous of being amiable. The servants, etc., were scrambling back to the camp, pursued by grave censures from Mohammed Latif. Aziz came to help the guests over the rocks. He was at the summit of his powers, vigorous and humble, too sure of himself to resent criticism, and he was sincerely pleased when he heard they were altering his plans. "Certainly, Miss Quested, so you and I will go together, and leave Mrs. Moore here, and we will not be long, yet we will not hurry, because we know that will be her wish." "Quite right. I'm sorry not to come too, but I'm a poor walker." "Dear Mrs. Moore, what does anything matter so long as you are my guests? I am very glad you are not coming, which sounds strange, but you are treating me with true frankness, as a friend." "Yes, I am your friend," she said, laying her hand on his sleeve, and thinking, despite her fatigue, how very charming, how very good, he was, and how deeply she desired his happiness. "So may I make another suggestion? Don't let so many people come with you this time. I think you may find it more convenient." "Exactly, exactly," he cried, and, rushing to the other extreme, forbade all except one guide to accompany Miss Quested and him to the Kawa Dol. "Is that all right?" he enquired. "Quite right, now enjoy yourselves, and when you come back tell me all about it." And she sank into the deck-chair. If they reached the big pocket of caves, they would be away nearly an hour. She took out her writing-pad, and began, "Dear Stella, Dear Ralph," then stopped, and looked at the queer valley and their feeble invasion of it. Even the elephant had become a nobody. Her eye rose from it to the entrance tunnel. No, she did not wish to repeat that experience. The more she thought over it, the more disagreeable and frightening it became. She minded it much more now than at the time. The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, "Pathos, piety, courage--they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value." If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same--"ou-bourn." If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo whatever their opinion and position, and however much they dodge or bluff--it would amount to the same, the serpent would descend and return to the ceiling. Devils are of the North, and poems can be written about them, but no one could romanticize the Marabar because it robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them to mankind. She tried to go on with her letter, reminding herself that she was only an elderly woman who had got up too early in the morning and journeyed too far, that the despair creeping over her was merely her despair, her personal weakness, and that even if she got a sunstroke and went mad the rest of the world would go on. But suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from "Let there be Light" to "It is finished" only amounted to "bourn." Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul, the mood of the last two months took definite form at last, and she realized that she didn't want to write to her children, didn't want to communicate with anyone, not even with God. She sat motionless with horror, and, when old Mohammed Latif came up to her, thought he would notice a difference. For a time she thought, "I am going to be ill," to comfort herself, then she surrendered to the vision. She lost all interest, even in Aziz, and the affectionate and sincere words that she had spoken to him seemed no longer hers but the air's.

CHAPTER XV

Miss Quested and Aziz and a guide continued the slightly tedious expedition. They did not talk much, for the

sun was getting high. The air felt like a warm bath into which hotter water is trickling constantly, the temperature rose and rose, the boulders said, "I am alive," the small stones answered, "I am almost alive." Between the chinks lay the ashes of little plants. They meant to climb to the rocking-stone on the summit, but it was too far, and they contented themselves with the big group of caves. _En route_ for these, they encountered several isolated caves, which the guide persuaded them to visit, but really there was nothing to see; they lit a match, admired its reflection in the polish, tested the echo and came out again. Aziz was "pretty sure they should come on some interesting old carvings soon," but only meant he wished there were some carvings. His deeper thoughts were about the breakfast. Symptoms of disorganization had appeared as he left the camp. He ran over the menu: an English breakfast, porridge and mutton chops, but some Indian dishes to cause conversation, and pan afterwards. He had never liked Miss Quested as much as Mrs. Moore, and had little to say to her, less than ever now that she would marry a British official. Nor had Adela much to say to him. If his mind was with the breakfast, hers was mainly with her marriage. Simla next week, get rid of Antony, a view of Thibet, tiresome wedding bells, Agra in October, see Mrs. Moore comfortably off from Bombay--the procession passed before her again, blurred by the heat, and then she turned to the more serious business of her life at Chandrapore. There were real difficulties here--Ronny's limitations and her own--but she enjoyed facing difficulties, and decided that if she could control her peevishness (always her weak point), and neither rail against Anglo-India nor succumb to it, their married life ought to be happy and profitable. She mustn't be too theoretical; she would deal with each problem as it came up, and trust to Ronny's common sense and her own. Luckily, each had abundance of common sense and good will. But as she toiled over a rock that resembled an inverted saucer, she thought, "What about love?" The rock was nicked by a double row of footholds, and somehow the question was suggested by them. Where had she seen footholds before? Oh yes, they were the pattern traced in the dust by the wheels of the Nawab Bahadur's car. She and Ronny--no, they did not love each other. "Do I take you too fast?" enquired Aziz, for she had paused, a doubtful expression on her face. The discovery had come so suddenly that she felt like a mountaineer whose rope had broken. Not to love the man one's going to marry! Not to find it out till this moment! Not even to have asked oneself the question until now! Something else to think out. Vexed rather than appalled, she stood still, her eyes on the sparkling rock. There was esteem and animal contact at dusk, but the emotion that links them was absent. Ought she to break her engagement off? She was inclined to think not--it would cause so much trouble to others; besides, she wasn't convinced that love is necessary to a successful union. If love is everything, few marriages would survive the honeymoon. "No, I'm all right, thanks," she said, and, her emotions well under control, resumed the climb, though she felt a bit dashed. Aziz held her hand, the guide adhered to the surface like a lizard and scampered about as if governed by a personal centre of gravity. "Are you married, Dr. Aziz?" she asked, stopping again, and frowning. "Yes, indeed, do come and see my wife "--for he felt it more artistic to have his wife alive for a moment. "Thank you," she said absently. "She is not in Chandrapore just now." "And have you children?" "Yes, indeed, three," he replied in firmer tones. "Are they a great pleasure to you?" "Why, naturally, I adore them," he laughed. "I suppose so." What a handsome little Oriental he was, and no doubt his wife and children were beautiful too, for people usually get what they already possess. She did not admire him with any personal warmth, for there was nothing of the vagrant in her blood, but she guessed he might attract women of his own race and rank, and she regretted that neither she nor Ronny had physical charm. It does make a difference in a relationship--beauty, thick hair, a fine skin. Probably this man had several wives--Mohammedans always insist on their full four, according to Mrs. Turton. And having no one else to speak to on that eternal rock, she gave rein to the subject of marriage and said in her honest, decent, inquisitive way: "Have you one wife or more than one?" The question shocked the young man very much. It challenged a new conviction of his community, and new convictions are more sensitive than old. If she had said, "Do you worship one god or several?" he would not have objected. But to ask an educated Indian Moslem how many wives he has--appalling, hideous! He was in trouble how to conceal his confusion. "One, one in my own particular case," he sputtered, and let go of her hand. Quite a number of caves were at the top of the track, and thinking, "Damn the English even at their best," he plunged into one of them to recover his balance. She followed at her leisure, quite unconscious that she had said the wrong thing, and not seeing him, she also went into a cave, thinking with half her mind "sight-seeing bores me," and wondering with the other half about marriage.

CHAPTER XVI

He waited in his cave a minute, and lit a cigarette, so that he could remark on rejoining her, "I bolted in to get out of the draught," or something of the sort. When he returned, he found the guide, alone, with his head on one side. He had heard a noise, he said, and then Aziz heard it too: the noise of a motor-car. They were now on the outer shoulder of the Kawa Dol, and by scrambling twenty yards they got a glimpse of the plain. A car was coming towards the hills down the Chandrapore road. But they could not get a good view of it, because the precipitous bastion curved at the top, so that the base was not easily seen and the car disappeared as it came nearer. No doubt it would stop almost exactly beneath them, at the place where the pukka road degenerated into a path, and the elephant had turned to sidle into the hills. He ran back to tell the strange news to his guest. The guide explained that she had gone into a cave. "Which cave?" He indicated the group

vaguely. "You should have kept her in sight, it was your duty," said Aziz severely. "Here are twelve caves at least. How am I to know which contains my guest? Which is the cave I was in myself?" The same vague gesture. And Aziz, looking again, could not even be sure he had returned to the same group. Caves appeared in every direction--it seemed their original spawning place--and the orifices were always the same size. He thought, "Merciful Heavens, Miss Quested is lost," then pulled himself together, and began to look for her calmly. "Shout!" he commanded. When they had done this for awhile, the guide explained that to shout is useless, because a Marabar cave can hear no sound but its own. Aziz wiped his head, and sweat began to stream inside his clothes. The place was so confusing; it was partly a terrace, partly a zigzag, and full of grooves that led this way and that like snaketracks. He tried to go into every one, but he never knew where he had started. Caves got behind caves or confabulated in pairs, and some were at the entrance of a gully. "Come here!" he called gently, and when the guide was in reach, he struck him in the face for a punishment. The man fled, and he was left alone. He thought, "This is the end of my career, my guest is lost." And then he discovered the simple and sufficient explanation of the mystery. Miss Quested wasn't lost. She had joined the people in the car--friends of hers, no doubt, Mr. Heaslop perhaps. He had a sudden glimpse of her, far down the gully--only a glimpse, but there she was quite plain, framed between rocks, and speaking to another lady. He was so relieved that he did not think her conduct odd. Accustomed to sudden changes of plan, he supposed that she had run down the Kawa Do! impulsively, in the hope of a little drive. He started back alone towards his camp, and almost at once caught sight of something which would have disquieted him very much a moment before: Miss Quested's field glasses. They were lying at the verge of a cave, half-way down an entrance tunnel. He tried to hang them over his shoulder, but the leather strap had broken, so he put them into his pocket instead. When he had gone a few steps, he thought she might have dropped something else, so he went back to look. But the previous difficulty recurred: he couldn't identify the cave. Down in the plain he heard the car starting; however, he couldn't catch a second glimpse of that. So he scrambled down the valley-face of the hill towards Mrs. Moore, and here he was more successful: the colour and confusion of his little camp soon appeared, and in the midst of it he saw an Englishman's topi, and beneath it--oh, joy!--smiled not Mr. Heaslop, but Fielding. "Fielding! Oh, I have so wanted you!" he cried, dropping the "Mr." for the first time. And his friend ran to meet him, all so pleasant and jolly, no dignity, shouting explanations and apologies about the train. Fielding had come in the newly arrived car--Miss Derek's car--that other lady was Miss Derek. Chatter, chatter, all the servants leaving their cooking to listen. Excellent Miss Derek! She had met Fielding by chance at the post office, said, "Why haven't you gone to the Marabar?" heard how he missed the train, offered to run him there and then. Another nice English lady. Where was she? Left with car and chauffeur while Fielding found camp. Car couldn't get up-- no, of course not--hundreds of people must go down to escort Miss Derek and show her the way. The elephant in person. . . . "Aziz, can I have a drink?" "Certainly not." He flew to get one. "Mr. Fielding!" called Mrs. Moore, from her patch of shade; they had not spoken yet, because his arrival had coincided with the torrent from the hill. "Good morning again!" he cried, relieved to find all well. "Mr. Fielding, have you seen Miss Quested?" "But I've only just arrived. Where is she?" "I do not know." "Aziz! Where have you put Miss Quested to?" Aziz, who was returning with a drink in his hand, had to think for a moment. His heart was full of new happiness. The picnic, after a nasty shock or two, had developed into something beyond his dreams, for Fielding had not only come, but brought an uninvited guest. "Oh, she's all right," he said; "she went down to see Miss Derek. Well, here's luck! Chin-chin!" "Here's luck, but chin-chin I do refuse," laughed Fielding, who detested the phrase. "Here's to India!" "Here's luck, and here's to England!" Miss Derek's chauffeur stopped the cavalcade which was starting to escort his mistress up, and informed it that she had gone back with the other young lady to Chandrapore; she had sent him to say so. She was driving herself. "Oh yes, that's quite likely," said Aziz. "I knew they'd gone for a spin." "Chandrapore? The man's made a mistake," Fielding exclaimed. "Oh no, why?" He was disappointed, but made light of it; no doubt the two young ladies were great friends. He would prefer to give breakfast to all four; still, guests must do as they wish, or they become prisoners. He went away cheerfully to inspect the porridge and the ice. "What's happened?" asked Fielding, who felt at once that something had gone queer. All the way out Miss Derek had chattered about the picnic, called it an unexpected treat, and said that she preferred Indians who didn't invite her to their entertainments to those who did it. Mrs. Moore sat swinging her foot, and appeared sulky and stupid. She said: "Miss Derek is most unsatisfactory and restless, always in a hurry, always wanting something new; she will do anything in the world except go back to the Indian lady who pays her." Fielding, who didn't dislike Miss Derek, replied: "She wasn't in a hurry when I left her. There was no question of returning to Chandrapore. It looks to me as if Miss Quested's in the hurry." "Adela ?--she's never been in a hurry in her life," said the old lady sharply. "I say it'll prove to be Miss Quested's wish, in fact I know it is," persisted the schoolmaster. He was annoyed--chiefly with himself. He had begun by missing a train--a sin he was never guilty of--and now that he did arrive it was to upset Aziz' arrangements for the second time. He wanted someone to share the blame, and frowned at Mrs. Moore rather magisterially. "Aziz is a charming fellow," he announced. "I know," she answered, with a yawn. "He has taken endless trouble to make a success of our picnic." They knew one another very little, and felt rather awkward at being drawn together by an Indian. The racial problem can take subtle forms. In their case it had induced a sort of jealousy, a mutual suspicion. He tried to goad her enthusiasm; she scarcely spoke. Aziz fetched them to breakfast. "It is quite natural about Miss Quested," he remarked, for he had been working the incident a little in his mind, to get rid of its

roughnesses. "We were having an interesting talk with our guide, then the car was seen, so she decided to go down to her friend." Incurably inaccurate, he already thought that this was what had occurred. He was inaccurate because he was sensitive. He did not like to remember Miss Quested's remark about polygamy, because it was unworthy of a guest, so he put it from his mind, and with it the knowledge that he had bolted into a cave to get away from her. He was inaccurate because he desired to honour her, and--facts being entangled--he had to arrange them in her vicinity, as one tidies the ground after extracting a weed. Before breakfast was over, he had told a good many lies. "She ran to her friend, I to mine," he went on, smiling. "And now I am with my friends and they are with me and each other, which is happiness." Loving them both, he expected them to love each other. They didn't want to. Fielding thought with hostility, "I knew these women would make trouble," and Mrs. Moore thought, "This man, having missed the train, tries to blame us"; but her thoughts were feeble; since her faintness in the cave she was sunk in apathy and cynicism. The wonderful India of her opening weeks, with its cool nights and acceptable hints of infinity, had vanished. Fielding ran up to see one cave. He wasn't impressed. Then they got on the elephant and the picnic began to unwind out of the corridor and escaped under the precipice towards the railway station, pursued by stabs of hot air. They came to the place where he had quitted the car. A disagreeable thought now struck him, and he said: "Aziz, exactly where and how did you leave Miss Quested?" "Up there." He indicated the Kawa Dol cheerfully. "But how--" A gully, or rather a crease, showed among the rocks at this place; it was scurfy with cactuses. "I suppose the guide helped her." "Oh, rather, most helpful." "Is there a path off the top?" "Millions of paths, my dear fellow." Fielding could see nothing but the crease. Everywhere else the glaring granite plunged into the earth. "But you saw them get down safe?" "Yes, yes, she and Miss Derek, and go off in the car." "Then the guide came back to you?" "Exactly. Got a cigarette?" "I hope she wasn't ill," pursued the Englishman. The crease continued as a nullah across the plain, the water draining off this way towards the Ganges. "She would have wanted me, if she was ill, to attend her." "Yes, that sounds sense." "I see you're worrying, let's talk of other things," he said kindly. "Miss Quested was always to do what she wished, it was our arrangement. I see you are worrying on my account, but really I don't mind, I never notice trifles." "I do worry on your account. I consider they have been impolite!" said Fielding, lowering his voice. "She had no right to dash away from your party, and Miss Derek had no right to abet her." So touchy as a rule, Aziz was unassailable. The wings that uplifted him did not falter, because he was a Mogul emperor who had done his duty. Perched on his elephant, he watched the Marabar Hills recede, and saw again, as provinces of his kingdom, the grim untidy plain, the frantic and feeble movements of the buckets, the white shrines, the shallow graves, the suave sky, the snake that looked like a tree. He had given his guests as good a time as he could, and if they came late or left early that was not his affair. Mrs. Moore slept, swaying against the rods of the howdah, Mohammed Latif embraced her with efficiency and respect, and by his own side sat Fielding, whom he began to think of as "Cyril." "Aziz, have you figured out what this picnic will cost you?" "Sh! my dear chap, don't mention that part. Hundreds and hundreds of rupees. The completed account will be too awful; my friends' servants have robbed me right and left, and as for an elephant, she apparently eats gold. I can trust you not to repeat this. And M.L.-- please employ initials, he listens--is far the worst of all." "I told you he's no good." "He is plenty of good for himself; his dishonesty will ruin me." "Aziz, how monstrous!" "I am delighted with him really, he has made my guests comfortable; besides, it is my duty to employ him, he is my cousin. If money goes, money comes. If money stays, death comes. Did you ever hear that useful Urdu proverb? Probably not, for I have just invented it." "My proverbs are: A penny saved is a penny earned; A stitch in time saves nine; Look before you leap; and the British Empire rests on them. You will never kick us out, you know, until you cease employing M.L.'s and such." "Oh, kick you out? Why should I trouble over that dirty job? Leave it to the politicians. . . . No, when I was a student I got excited over your damned countrymen, certainly; but if they'll let me get on with my profession and not be too rude to me officially, I really don't ask for more." "But you do; you take them to a picnic." "This picnic is nothing to do with English or Indian; it is an expedition of friends." So the cavalcade ended, partly pleasant, partly not; the Brahman cook was picked up, the train arrived, pushing its burning throat over the plain, and the twentieth century took over from the sixteenth. Mrs. Moore entered her carriage, the three men went to theirs, adjusted the shutters, turned on the electric fan and tried to get some sleep. In the twilight, all resembled corpses, and the train itself seemed dead though it moved--a coffin from the scientific north which troubled the scenery four times a day. As it left the Marabars, their nasty little cosmos disappeared, and gave place to the Marabars seen from a distance, finite and rather romantic. The train halted once under a pump, to drench the stock of coal in its tender. Then it caught sight of the main line in the distance, took courage, and bumped forward, rounded the civil station, surmounted the level-crossing (the rails were scorching now), and clanked to a standstill. Chandrapore, Chandrapore! The expedition was over. And as it ended, as they sat up in the gloom and prepared to enter ordinary life, suddenly the long drawn strangeness of the morning snapped. Mr. Haq, the Inspector of Police, flung open the door of their carriage and said in shrill tones: "Dr. Aziz, it is my highly painful duty to arrest you." "Hullo, some mistake," said Fielding, at once taking charge of the situation. "Sir, they are my instructions. I know nothing." "On what charge do you arrest him?" "I am under instructions not to say." "Don't answer me like that. Produce your warrant." "Sir, excuse me, no warrant is required under these particular circumstances. Refer to Mr. McBryde." "Very well, so we will. Come along, Aziz, old man; nothing to fuss about, some blunder." "Dr. Aziz, will you kindly come?--a closed conveyance stands in readiness." The young man sobbed--his first sound--and tried to

escape out of the opposite door on to the line. "That will compel me to use force," Mr. Haq wailed. "Oh, for God's sake--" cried Fielding, his own nerves breaking under the contagion, and pulled him back before a scandal started, and shook him like a baby. A second later, and he would have been out, whistles blowing, a man-hunt. . . . "Dear fellow, we're coming to McBryde together, and enquire what's gone wrong--he's a decent fellow, it's all unintentional . . . he'll apologize. Never, never act the criminal." "My children and my name!" he gasped, his wings broken. "Nothing of the sort. Put your hat straight and take my arm. I'll see you through." "Ah, thank God, he comes," the Inspector exclaimed. They emerged into the midday heat, arm in arm. The station was seething. Passengers and porters rushed out of every recess, many Government servants, more police. Ronny escorted Mrs. Moore. Mohammed Latif began wailing. And before they could make their way through the chaos, Fielding was called off by the authoritative tones of Mr. Turton, and Aziz went on to prison alone.

CHAPTER XVII

The Collector had watched the arrest from the interior of the waiting-room, and throwing open its perforated doors of zinc, he was now revealed like a god in a shrine. When Fielding entered the doors clapped to, and were guarded by a servant, while a punkah, to mark the importance of the moment, flapped dirty petticoats over their heads. The Collector could not speak at first. His face was white, fanatical, and rather beautiful--the expression that all English faces were to wear at Chandrapore for many days. Always brave and unselfish, he was now fused by some white and generous heat; he would have killed himself, obviously, if he had thought it right to do so. He spoke at last. "The worst thing in my whole career has happened," he said. "Miss Quested has been insulted in one of the Marabar caves." "Oh no, oh no, no," gasped the other, feeling sickish. "She escaped--by God's grace." "Oh no, no, but not Aziz . . . not Aziz . . ." He nodded. "Absolutely impossible, grotesque." "I called you to preserve you from the odium that would attach to you if you were seen accompanying him to the Police Station," said Turton, paying no attention to his protest, indeed scarcely hearing it. He repeated "Oh no," like a fool. He couldn't frame other words. He felt that a mass of madness had arisen and tried to overwhelm them all; it had to be shoved back into its pit somehow, and he didn't know how to do it, because he did not understand madness: he had always gone about sensibly and quietly until a difficulty came right. "Who lodges this infamous charge?" he asked, pulling himself together. "Miss Derek and--the victim herself. . . ." He nearly broke down, unable to repeat the girl's name. "Miss Quested herself definitely accuses him of--" He nodded and turned his face away. "Then she's mad." "I cannot pass that last remark," said the Collector, waking up to the knowledge that they differed, and trembling with fury. "You will withdraw it instantly. It is the type of remark you have permitted yourself to make ever since you came to Chandrapore." "I'm excessively sorry, sir; I certainly withdraw it unconditionally." For the man was half mad himself. "Pray, Mr. Fielding, what induced you to speak to me in such a tone?" "The news gave me a very great shock, so I must ask you to forgive me. I cannot believe that Dr. Aziz is guilty." He slammed his hand on the table. "That--that is a repetition of your insult in an aggravated form." "If I may venture to say so, no," said Fielding, also going white, but sticking to his point. "I make no reflection on the good faith of the two ladies, but the charge they are bringing against Aziz rests upon some mistake, and five minutes will clear it up. The man's manner is perfectly natural; besides, I know him to be incapable of infamy." "It does indeed rest upon a mistake," came the thin, biting voice of the other. "It does indeed. I have had twenty-five years' experience of this country"--he paused, and "twenty-five years" seemed to fill the waiting-room with their staleness and ungenerosity--"and during those twenty-five years I have never known anything but disaster result when English people and Indians attempt to be intimate socially. Intercourse, yes. Courtesy, by all means. Intimacy--never, never. The whole weight of my authority is against it. I have been in charge at Chandrapore for six years, and if everything has gone smoothly, if there has been mutual respect and esteem, it is because both peoples kept to this simple rule. New-corners set our traditions aside, and in an instant what you see happens, the work of years is undone and the good name of my District ruined for a generation. I--I----can't see the end of this day's work, Mr. Fielding. You, who are imbued with modern ideas--no doubt you can. I wish I had never lived to see its beginning, I know that. It is the end of me. That a lady, that a young lady engaged to my most valued subordinate--that she--an English girl fresh from England--that I should have lived--" Involved in his own emotions, he broke down. What he had said was both dignified and pathetic, but had it anything to do with Aziz? Nothing at all, if Fielding was right. It is impossible to regard a tragedy from two points of view, and whereas Turton had decided to avenge the girl, he hoped to save the man. He wanted to get away and talk to McBryde, who had always been friendly to him, was on the whole sensible, and could, anyhow, be trusted to keep cool. "I came down particularly on your account--while poor Heaslop got his mother away. I regarded it as the most friendly thing I could do. I meant to tell you that there will be an informal meeting at the club this evening to discuss the situation, but I am doubtful whether you will care to come. Your visits there are always infrequent." "I shall certainly come, sir, and I am most grateful to you for all the trouble you have taken over me. May I venture to ask--where Miss Quested is." He replied with a gesture; she was ill. "Worse and worse, appalling," he said feelingly. But the Collector looked at him sternly, because he was keeping his head. He had not gone mad at the phrase "an English girl fresh from England," he had not rallied to the banner of race. He was still after facts, though the herd had decided on emotion. Nothing enrages

Anglo-India more than the lantern of reason if it is exhibited for one moment after its extinction is decreed. All over Chandrapore that day the Europeans were putting aside their normal personalities and sinking themselves in their community. Pity, wrath, heroism, filled them, but the power of putting two and two together was annihilated. Terminating the interview, the Collector walked on to the platform. The confusion there was revolting. A chuprassi of Ronny's had been told to bring up some trifles belonging to the ladies, and was appropriating for himself various articles to which he had no right; he was a camp follower of the angry English. Mohammed Latif made no attempt to resist him. Hassan flung off his turban, and wept. All the comforts that had been provided so liberally were rolled about and wasted in the sun. The Collector took in the situation at a glance, and his sense of justice functioned though he was insane with rage. He spoke the necessary word, and the looting stopped. Then he drove off to his bungalow and gave rein to his passions again. When he saw the coolies asleep in the ditches or the shopkeepers rising to salute him on their little platforms, he said to himself: "I know what you're like at last; you shall pay for this, you shall squeal."

CHAPTER XVIII

Mr. McBryde, the District Superintendent of Police, was the most reflective and best educated of the Chandrapore officials. He had read and thought a good deal, and, owing to a somewhat unhappy marriage, had evolved a complete philosophy of life. There was much of the cynic about him, but nothing of the bully; he never lost his temper or grew rough, and he received Aziz with courtesy, was almost reassuring. "I have to detain you until you get bail," he said, "but no doubt your friends will be applying for it, and of course they will be allowed to visit you, under regulations. I am given certain information, and have to act on it--I'm not your judge." Aziz was led off weeping. Mr. McBryde was shocked at his downfall, but no Indian ever surprised him, because he had a theory about climatic zones. The theory ran: "All unfortunate natives are criminals at heart, for the simple reason that they live south of latitude 30. They are not to blame, they have not a dog's chance--we should be like them if we settled here." Born at Karachi, he seemed to contradict his theory, and would sometimes admit as much with a sad, quiet smile. "Another of them found out," he thought, as he set to work to draft his statement to the Magistrate. He was interrupted by the arrival of Fielding. He imparted all he knew without reservations. Miss Derek had herself driven in the Mudkul car about an hour ago, she and Miss Quested both in a terrible state. They had gone straight to his bungalow where he happened to be, and there and then he had taken down the charge and arranged for the arrest at the railway station. "What is the charge, precisely?" "That he followed her into the cave and made insulting advances. She hit at him with her field-glasses; he pulled at them and the strap broke, and that is how she got away. When we searched him just now, they were in his pocket." "Oh no, oh no, no; it'll be cleared up in five minutes," he cried again. "Have a look at them." The strap had been newly broken, the eye-piece was jammed. The logic of evidence said "Guilty." "Did she say any more?" "There was an echo that appears to have frightened her. Did you go into those caves?" "I saw one of them. There was an echo. Did it get on her nerves?" "I couldn't worry her overmuch with questions. She'll have plenty to go through in the witness-box. They don't bear thinking about, these next weeks. I wish the Marabar Hills and all they contain were at the bottom of the sea. Evening after evening one saw them from the club, and they were just a harmless name. . . - Yes, we start already." For a visiting card was brought; Vakil Mahmoud Ali, legal adviser to the prisoner, asked to be allowed to see him. McBryde signed, gave permission, and continued: "I heard some more from Miss Derek-- she is an old friend of us both and talks freely; well-- her account is that you went off to locate the camp, and almost at once she heard stones falling on the Kawa Dol and saw Miss Quested running straight down the face of a precipice. Well. She climbed up a sort of gully to her, and found her practically done for--her helmet off--" "Was a guide not with her?" interrupted Fielding. "No. She had got among some cactuses. Miss Derek saved her life coming just then--she was beginning to fling herself about. She helped her down to the car. Miss Quested couldn't stand the Indian driver, cried, 'Keep him away'--and it was that that put our friend on the track of what had happened. They made straight for our bungalow, and are there now. That's the story as far as I know it yet. She sent the driver to join you. I think she behaved with great sense." "I suppose there's no possibility of my seeing Miss Quested?" he asked suddenly. "I hardly think that would do. Surely." "I was afraid you'ld say that. I should very much like to." "She is in no state to see anyone. Besides, you don't know her well." "Hardly at all. . . . But you see I believe she's under some hideous delusion, and that that wretched boy is innocent." The policeman started in surprise, and a shadow passed over his face, for he could not bear his dispositions to be upset. "I had no idea that was in your mind," he said, and looked for support at the signed deposition, which lay before him. "Those field-glasses upset me for a minute, but I've thought since: it's impossible that, having attempted to assault her, he would put her glasses into his pocket." "Quite possible, I'm afraid; when an Indian goes bad, he goes not only very bad, but very queer." "I don't follow." "How should you? When you think of crime you think of English crime. The psychology here is different. I dare say you'll tell me next that he was quite normal when he came down from the hill to greet you. No reason he should not be. Read any of the Mutiny records; which, rather than the Bhagavad Gita, should be your Bible in this country. Though I'm not sure that the one and the other are not closely connected. Am I not being beastly? But, you see, Fielding, as I've said to you once before, you're a schoolmaster, and consequently you come across these people at their best. That's what puts you wrong. They can be charming as boys. But I know them as they really are, after they have developed

into men. Look at this, for instance." He held up Aziz' pocket-case. "I am going through the contents. They are not edifying. Here is a letter from a friend who apparently keeps a brothel." "I don't want to hear his private letters." "It'll have to be quoted in Court, as bearing on his morals. He was fixing up to see women at Calcutta." "Oh, that'll do, that'll do." McBryde stopped, na[illegible]ly puzzled. It was obvious to him that any two sahibs ought to pool all they knew about any Indian, and he could not think where the objection came in. "I dare say you have the right to throw stones at a young man for doing that, but I haven't. I did the same at his age." So had the Superintendent of Police, but he considered that the conversation had taken a turn that was undesirable. He did not like Fielding's next remark either. "Miss Quested really cannot be seen? You do know that for a certainty?" "You have never explained to me what's in your mind here. Why on earth do you want to see her?" "On the off chance of her recanting before you send in that report and he's committed for trial, and the whole thing goes to blazes. Old man, don't argue about this, but do of Your goodness just ring up your wife or Miss Derek and enquire. It'll cost you nothing." "It's no use ringing up them," he replied, stretching out for the telephone. "Callendar settles a question like that, of course. You haven't grasped that she's seriously ill." "He's sure to refuse, it's all he exists for," said the other desperately. The expected answer came back: the Major would not hear of the patient being troubled. "I only wanted to ask her whether she is certain, dead certain, that it was Aziz who followed her into the cave." "Possibly my wife might ask her that much." "But _I_ wanted to ask her. I want someone who believes in him to ask her." "What difference does that make?" "She is among people who disbelieve in Indians." "Well, she tells her own story, doesn't she?" "I know but she tells it to you." McBryde raised his eyebrows, murmuring: "A bit too finespun. Anyhow, Callendar won't hear of you seeing her. I'm sorry to say he gave a bad account just now. He says that she is by no means out of danger." They were silent. Another card was brought into the office--Hamidullah's The opposite army was gathering. "I must put this report through now, Fielding." "I wish you wouldn't." "How can I not?" "I feel that things are rather unsatisfactory as well as most disastrous. We are heading for a most awful smash. I can see your prisoner, I suppose." He hesitated. "His own people seem in touch with him all right." "Well, when he's done with them." "I wouldn't keep you waiting; good heavens, you take precedence of any Indian visitor, of course. I meant what's the good. Why mix yourself up with pitch?" "I say he's innocent--" "Innocence or guilt, why mix yourself up? What's the good?" "Oh, good, good," he cried, feeling that every earth was being stopped. "One's got to breathe occasionally, at least I have. I mayn't see her, and now I mayn't see him. I promised him to come up here with him to you, but Turton called me off before I could get two steps." "Sort of all-white thing the Burra Sahib would do," he muttered sentimentally. And trying not to sound patronizing, he stretched his hand over the table, and said: "We shall all have to hang together, old man, I'm afraid. I'm your junior in years, I know, but very much your senior in service; you don't happen to know this poisonous country as well as I do, and you must take it from me that the general situation is going to be nasty at Chandrapore during the next few weeks, very nasty indeed." "So I have just told you." "But at a time like this there's no room for--well--personal views. The man who doesn't toe the line is lost." "I see what you mean." "No, you don't see entirely. He not only loses himself, he weakens his friends. If you leave the line, you leave a gap in the line. These jackals"--he pointed at the lawyers' cards--"are looking with all their eyes for a gap." "Can I visit Aziz?" was his answer. "No." Now that he knew of Turton's attitude, the policeman had no doubts. "You may see him on a magistrate's order, but on my own responsibility I don't feel justified. It might lead to more complications." Fielding paused, reflecting that if he had been either ten years younger or ten years longer in India, he would have responded to McBryde's appeal. The bit between his teeth, he then said, "To whom do I apply for an order?" "City Magistrate." "That sounds comfortable!" "Yes, one can't very well worry poor Heaslop." More "evidence" appeared at this moment--the tabledrawer from Aziz' bungalow, borne with triumph in a corporal's arms. "Photographs of women. Ah!" "That's his wife," said Fielding, wincing. "How do you know that?" "He told me." McBryde gave a faint, incredulous smile, and started rummaging in the drawer. His face became inquisitive and slightly bestial. "Wife indeed, I know those wives!" he was thinking. Aloud he said: "Well, you must trot off now, old man, and the Lord help us, the Lord help us all. . . ." As if his prayer had been heard, there was a sudden rackety-dacket on a temple bell.

CHAPTER XIX

Hamidullah was the next stage. He was waiting outside the Superintendent's office, and sprang up respectfully when he saw Fielding. To the Englishman's passionate "It's all a mistake," he answered, "Ah, ah, has some evidence come?" "It will come," said Fielding, holding his hand. "Ah, yes, Mr. Fielding; but when once an Indian has been arrested, we do not know where it will stop." His manner was deferential. "You are very good to greet me in this public fashion, I appreciate it; but, Mr. Fielding, nothing convinces a magistrate except evidence. Did Mr. McBryde make any remark when my card came in? Do you think my application annoyed him, will prejudice him against my friend at all? If so, I will gladly retire." "He's not annoyed, and if he was, what does it matter?" "Ah, it's all very well for you to speak like that, but we have to live in this country." The leading barrister of Chandrapore, with the dignified manner and Cambridge degree, had been rattled. He too loved Aziz, and knew he was calumniated; but faith did not rule his heart, and he prated of "policy" and "evidence" in a way that saddened the Englishman. Fielding, too, had his anxieties--he didn't like the fieldglasses or the discrepancy over the guide--but he relegated them to the edge of his mind, and forbade

them to infect its core. Aziz was innocent, and all action must be based on that, and the people who said he was guilty were wrong, and it was hopeless to try to propitiate them. At the moment when he was throwing in his lot with Indians, he realized the profundity of the gulf that divided him from them. They always do something disappointing. Aziz had tried to run away from the police, Mohammed Latif had not checked the pilfering. And now Hamidullah!--instead of raging and denouncing, he temporized. Are Indians cowards? No, but they are bad starters and occasionally jib. Fear is everywhere; the British Raj rests on it; the respect and courtesy Fielding himself enjoyed were unconscious acts of propitiation. He told Hamidullah to cheer up, all would end well; and Hamidullah did cheer up, and became pugnacious and sensible. McBryde's remark, "If you leave the line, you leave a gap in the line," was being illustrated. "First and foremost, the question of bail . . ." Application must be made this afternoon. Fielding wanted to stand surety. Hamidullah thought the Nawab Bahadur should be approached. "Why drag in him, though?" To drag in everyone was precisely the barrster's aim. He then suggested that the lawyer in charge of the case would be a Hindu; the defence would then make a wider appeal. He mentioned one or two names--men from a distance who would not be intimidated by local conditions--and said he should prefer Amritrao, a Calcutta barrister, who had a high reputation professionally and personally, but who was notoriously anti-British. Fielding demurred; this seemed to him going to the other extreme. Aziz must be cleared, but with a minimum of racial hatred. Amritrao was loathed at the club. His retention would be regarded as a political challenge. "Oh no, we must hit with all our strength. When I saw my friend's private papers carried in just now in the arms of a dirty policeman, I said to myself, 'Amritrao is the man to clear up this.'" There was a lugubrious pause. The temple bell continued to jangle harshly. The interminable and disastrous day had scarcely reached its afternoon. Continuing their work, the wheels of Dominion now propelled a messenger on a horse from the Superintendent to the Magistrate with an official report of arrest. "Don't complicate, let the cards play themselves," entreated Fielding, as he watched the man disappear into dust. "We're bound to win, there's nothing else we can do. She will never be able to substantiate the charge." This comforted Hamidullah, who remarked with complete sincerity, "At a crisis, the English are really unequalled." "Good-bye, then, my dear Hamidullah (we must drop the 'Mr.' now). Give Aziz my love when you see him, and tell him to keep calm, calm, calm. I shall go back to the College now. If you want me, ring me up; if you don't, don't, for I shall be very busy." "Good-bye, my dear Fielding, and you actually are on our side against your own people?" "Yes. Definitely." He regretted taking sides. To slink through India unlabelled was his aim. Henceforward he would be called "anti-British," "seditious"--terms that bored him, and diminished his utility. He foresaw that besides being a tragedy, there would be a muddle; already he saw several tiresome little knots, and each time his eye returned to them, they were larger. Born in freedom, he was not afraid of the muddle, but he recognized its existence. This section of the day concluded in a queer vague talk with Professor Godbole. The interminable affair of the Russell's Viper was again in question. Some weeks before, one of the masters at the College, an unpopular Parsi, had found a Russell's Viper nosing round his classroom. Perhaps it had crawled in of itself, but perhaps it had not, and the staff still continued to interview their Principal about it, and to take up his time with their theories. The reptile is so poisonous that he did not like to cut them short, and this they knew. Thus when his mind was bursting with other troubles and he was debating whether he should compose a letter of appeal to Miss Quested, he was obliged to listen to a speech which lacked both basis and conclusion, and floated through air. At the end of it Godbole said, "May I now take my leave?"-- always an indication that he had not come to his point yet. "Now I take my leave, I must tell you how glad I am to hear that after all you succeeded in reaching the Marabar. I feared my unpunctuality had prevented you, but you went (a far pleasanter method) in Miss Derek's car. I hope the expedition was a successful one." "The news has not reached you yet, I can see." "Oh yes." "No; there has been a terrible catastrophe about Aziz." "Oh yes. That is all round the College." "Well, the expedition where that occurs can scarcely be called a successful one," said Fielding, with an amazed stare. "I cannot say. I was not present." He stared again--a most useless operation, for no eye could see what lay at the bottom of the Brahman's mind, and yet he had a mind and a heart too, and all his friends trusted him, without knowing why. "I am most frightfully cut up," he said. "So I saw at once on entering your office. I must not detain you, but I have a small private difficulty on which I want your help; I am leaving your service shortly, as you know." "Yes, alas!" "And am returning to my birthplace in Central India to take charge of education there. I want to start a High School there on sound English lines, that shall be as like Government College as possible." "Well?" he sighed, trying to take an interest. "At present there is only vernacular education at Mau. I shall feel it my duty to change all that. I shall advise His Highness to sanction at least a High School in the Capital, and if possible another in each pargana." Fielding sunk his head on his arms; really, Indians were sometimes unbearable. "The point--the point on which I desire your help is this: what name should be given to the school?" "A name? A name for a school?" he said, feeling sickish suddenly, as he had done in the waiting-room. "Yes, a name, a suitable title, by which it can be called, by which it may be generally known." "Really--I have no names for schools in my head. I can think of nothing but our poor Aziz. Have you grasped that at the present moment he is in prison?" "Oh yes. Oh no, I do not expect an answer to my question now. I only meant that when you are at leisure, you might think the matter over, and suggest two or three alternative titles for schools. I had thought of the 'Mr. Fielding High School,' but failing that, the 'King-Emperor George the Fifth.'" "Godbole!" The old fellow put his hands together, and looked sly and charming. "Is Aziz innocent or guilty?" "That is for the Court to decide. The verdict will be in strict accordance with the evidence, I make no doubt."

"Yes, yes, but your personal opinion. Here's a man we both like, generally esteemed; he lives here quietly doing his work. Well, what's one to make of it? Would he or would he not do such a thing?" "Ah, that is rather a different question from your previous one, and also more difficult: I mean difficult in our philosophy. Dr. Aziz is a most worthy young man, I have a great regard for him; but I think you are asking me whether the individual can commit good actions or evil actions, and that is rather difficult for us." He spoke without emotion and in short tripping syllables. "I ask you: did he do it or not? Is that plain? I know he didn't, and from that I start. I mean to get at the true explanation in a couple of days. My last notion is that it's the guide who went round with them. Malice on Miss Quested's part--it couldn't be that, though Hamidullah thinks so. She has certainly had some appalling experience. But you tell me, oh no--because good and evil are the same." "No, not exactly, please, according to our philosophy. Because nothing can be performed in isolation. All perform a good action, when one is performed, and when an evil action is performed, all perform it. To illustrate my meaning, let me take the case in point as an example. "I am informed that an evil action was performed in the Marabar Hills, and that a highly esteemed English lady is now seriously ill in consequence. My answer to that is this: that action was performed by Dr. Aziz." He stopped and sucked in his thin cheeks. "It was performed by the guide." He stopped again. "It was performed by you." Now he had an air of daring and of coyness. "It was performed by me." He looked shyly down the sleeve of his own coat. "And by my students. It was even performed by the lady herself. When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs." "And similarly when suffering occurs, and so on and so forth, and everything is anything and nothing something," he muttered in his irritation, for he needed the solid ground. "Excuse me, you are now again changing the basis of our discussion. We were discussing good and evil. Suffering is merely a matter for the individual. If a young lady has sunstroke, that is a matter of no significance to the universe. Oh no, not at all. Oh no, not the least. It is an isolated matter, it only concerns herself. If she thought her head did not ache, she would not be ill, and that would end it. But it is far otherwise in the case of good and evil. They are not what we think them, they are what they are, and each of us has contributed to both." "You're preaching that evil and good are the same." "Oh no, excuse me once again. Good and evil are different, as their names imply. But, in my own humble opinion, they are both of them aspects of my Lord. He is present in the one, absent in the other, and the difference between presence and absence is great, as great as my feeble mind can grasp. Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence, and we are therefore entitled to repeat, 'Come, come, come, come.'" And in the same breath, as if to cancel any beauty his words might have contained, he added, "But did you have time to visit any of the interesting Marabar antiquities?" Fielding was silent, trying to meditate and rest his brain. "Did you not even see the tank by the usual camping ground?" he nagged. "Yes, yes," he answered distractedly, wandering over half a dozen things at once. "That is good, then you saw the Tank of the Dagger." And he related a legend which might have been acceptable if he had told it at the tea-party a fortnight ago. It concerned a Hindu Rajah who had slain his own sister's son, and the dagger with which he performed the deed remained clamped to his hand until in the course of years he came to the Marabar Hills, where he was thirsty and wanted to drink but saw a thirsty cow and ordered the water to be offered to her first, which, when done, "dagger fell from his hand, and to commemorate miracle he built Tank." Professor Godbole's conversations frequently culminated in a cow. Fielding received this one in gloomy silence. In the afternoon he obtained a permit and saw Aziz, but found him unapproachable through misery. "You deserted me," was the only coherent remark. He went away to write his letter to Miss Quested. Even if it reached her, it would do no good, and probably the McBrydes would withhold it. Miss Quested did pull him up short. She was such a dry, sensible girl, and quite without malice: the last person in Chandrapore wrongfully to accuse an Indian.

CHAPTER XX

Although Miss Quested had not made herself popular with the English, she brought out all that was fine in their character. For a few hours an exalted emotion gushed forth, which the women felt even more keenly than the men, if not for so long. "What can we do for our sister?" was the only thought of Mesdames Callendar and Lesley, as they drove through the pelting heat to enquire. Mrs. Turton was the only visitor admitted to the sick-room. She came out ennobled by an unselfish sorrow. "She is my own darling girl," were the words she spoke, and then, remembering that she had called her "not pukka" and resented her engagement to young Heaslop, she began to cry. No one had ever seen the Collector's wife cry. Capable of tears--yes, but always reserving them for some adequate occasion, and now it had come. Ah, why had they not all been kinder to the stranger, more patient, given her not only hospitality but their hearts? The tender core of the heart that is so seldom used--they employed it for a little, under the stimulus of remorse. If all is over (as Major Callendar implied), well, all is over, and nothing can be done, but they retained some responsibility in her grievous wrong that they couldn't define. If she wasn't one of them, they ought to have made her one, and they could never do that now, she had passed beyond their invitation. "Why don't one think more of other people?" sighed pleasure-loving Miss Derek. These regrets only lasted in their pure form for a few hours. Before sunset, other considerations adulterated them, and the sense of guilt (so strangely connected with our first sight of any suffering) had begun to wear away. People drove into the club with studious calm--the jog-trot of country gentlefolk between green hedgerows, for the natives must not suspect that they were agitated. They exchanged the usual drinks, but everything tasted different, and then they looked out at the palisade of cactuses stabbing the purple throat of the sky; they realized that they were thousands of miles from any scenery that they understood. The club was fuller than usual, and several parents had brought their children into the rooms reserved for adults, which gave the air of the Residency at Lucknow. One young mother--a brainless but most beautiful girl--sat on a low ottoman in the smokingroom with her baby in her arms; her husband was away in the district, and she dared not return to her bungalow in case the "niggers attacked." The wife of a small railway official, she was generally snubbed; but this evening, with her abundant figure and masses of corn-gold hair, she symbolized all that is worth fighting and dying for; more permanent a symbol, perhaps, than poor Adela. "Don't worry, Mrs. Blakiston, those drums are only Mohurram," the men would tell her. "Then they've started," she moaned, clasping the infant and rather wishing he would not blow bubbles down his chin at such a moment as this. "No, of course not, and anyhow, they're not coming to the club." "And they're not coming to the Burra Sahib's bungalow either, my dear, and that's where you and your baby'll sleep to-night," answered Mrs. Turton, towering by her side like Pallas Athene, and determining in the future not to be such a snob. The Collector clapped his hands for silence. He was much calmer than when he had flown out at Fielding. He was indeed always calmer when he addressed several people than in a _t�-a-t�_. "I want to talk specially to the ladies," he said. " Not the least cause for alarm. Keep cool, keep cool. Don't go out more than you can help, don't go into the city, don't talk before your servants. That's all." "Harry, is there any news from the city?" asked his wife, standing at some distance from him, and also assuming her public safety voice. The rest were silent during the august colloquy. "Everything absolutely normal." "I had gathered as much. Those drums are merely Mohurram, of course." Merely the preparation for it--the Procession is not till next week." "Quite so, not till Monday." "Mr. McBryde's down there disguised as a Holy Man," said Mrs. Callendar. "That's exactly the sort of thing that must not be said," he remarked, pointing at her. "Mrs. Callendar, be more careful than that, please, in these times." "I . . . well, I . . ." She was not offended, his severity made her feel safe. "Any more questions? Necessary questions." "Is the--where is he--" Mrs. Lesley quavered. "Jail. Bail has been refused." Fielding spoke next. He wanted to know whether there was an official bulletin about Miss Quested's health, or whether the grave reports were due to gossip. His question produced a bad effect, partly because he had pronounced her name; she, like Aziz, was always referred to by a periphrasis. "I hope Callendar may be able to let us know how things are going before long." "I fail to see how that last question can be termed a necessary question," said Mrs. Turton. "Will all ladies leave the smoking-room now, please?" he cried, clapping his hands again. "And remember what I have said. We look to you to help us through a difficult time, and you can help us by behaving as if everything is normal. It is all I ask. Can I rely on you?" "Yes, indeed, Burra Sahib," they chorused out of peaked, anxious faces. They moved out, subdued yet elated, Mrs. Blakiston in their midst like a sacred flame. His simple words had reminded them that they were an outpost of Empire. By the side of their compassionate love for Adela another sentiment sprang up which was to strangle it in the long run. Its first signs were prosaic and small. Mrs. Turton made her loud, hard jokes at bridge, Mrs. Lesley began to knit a comforter. When the smoking-room was clear, the Collector sat on the edge of a table, so that he could dominate without formality. His mind whirled with contradictory impulses. He wanted to avenge Miss Quested and punish Fielding, while remaining scrupulously fair. He wanted to flog every native that he saw, but to do nothing that would lead to a riot or to the necessity for military intervention. The dread of having to call in the troops was vivid to him; soldiers put one thing straight, but leave a dozen others crooked, and they love to humiliate the civilian administration. One soldier was in the room this evening--a stray subaltern from a Gurkha regiment; he was a little drunk, and regarded his presence as providential. The Collector sighed. There seemed nothing for it but the old weary business of compromise

and moderation. He longed for the good old days when an Englishman could satisfy his own honour and no questions asked afterwards. Poor young Heaslop had taken a step in this direction, by refusing bail, but the Collector couldn't feel this was wise of poor young Heaslop. Not only would the Nawab Bahadur and others be angry, but the Government of India itself also watches--and behind it is that caucus of cranks and cravens, the British Parliament. He had constantly to remind himself that, in the eyes of the law, Aziz was not yet guilty, and the effort fatigued him. The others, less responsible, could behave naturally. They had started speaking of "women and children"-- that phrase that exempts the male from sanity when it has been repeated a few times. Each felt that all he loved best in the world was at stake, demanded revenge, and was filled with a not unpleasing glow, in which the chilly and half-known features of Miss Quested vanished, and were replaced by all that is sweetest and warmest in the private life. "But it's the women and children," they repeated, and the Collector knew he ought to stop them intoxicating themselves, but he hadn't the heart. "They ought to be compelled to give hostages," etc. Many of the said women and children were leaving for the Hill Station in a few days, and the suggestion was made that they should be packed off at once in a special train. "_And_ a jolly suggestion," the subaltern cried. "The army's got to come in sooner or later. (A special train was in his mind inseparable from troops.) This would never have happened if Barabas Hill was under military control. Station a bunch of Gurkhas at the entrance of the cave was all that was wanted." "Mrs. Blakiston was saying if only there were a few Tommies," remarked someone. "English no good," he cried, getting his loyalties mixed. "Native troops for this country. Give me the sporting type of native, give me Gurkhas, give me Rajputs, give me Jats, give me the Punjabi, give me Sikhs, give me Marathas, Bhils, Afridis and Pathans, and really if it comes to that, I don't mind if you give me the scums of the bazaars. Properly led, mind. I'd lead them anywhere--" The Collector nodded at him pleasantly, and said to his own people: "Don't start carrying arms about. I want everything to go on precisely as usual, until there's cause for the contrary. Get the womenfolk off to the hills, but do it quietly, and for Heaven's sake no more talk of special trains. Never mind what you think or feel. Possibly I have feelings too. One isolated Indian has attempted--is charged with an attempted crime." He flipped his forehead hard with his finger-nail, and they all realized that he felt as deeply as they did, and they loved him, and determined not to increase his difficulties. "Act upon that fact until there are more facts," he concluded. "Assume every Indian is an angel." They murmured, "Right you are, Burra Sahib. . . Angels. . . . Exactly. . . ." From the subaltern: "Exactly what I said. The native's all right if you get him alone. Lesley! Lesley! You remember the one I had a knock with on your Maidan last month. Well, he was all right. Any native who plays polo is all right. What you've got to stamp on is these educated classes, and, mind, I do know what I'm talking about this time." The smoking-room door opened, and let in a feminine buzz. Mrs. Turton called out, "She's better," and from both sections of the community a sigh of joy and relief rose. The Civil Surgeon, who had brought the good news, came in. His cumbrous, pasty face looked illtempered. He surveyed the company, saw Fielding crouched below him on an ottoman, and said, "H'm!" Everyone began pressing him for details. "No one's out of danger in this country as long as they have a temperature," was his answer. He appeared to resent his patient's recovery, and no one who knew the old Major and his ways was surprised at this. "Squat down, Callendar; tell us all about it." "Take me some time to do that." "How's the old lady?" "Temperature." "My wife heard she was sinking." "So she may be. I guarantee nothing. I really can't be plagued with questions, Lesley." "Sorry, old man." "Heaslop's just behind me." At the name of Heaslop a fine and beautiful expression was renewed on every face. Miss Quested was only a victim, but young Heaslop was a martyr; he was the recipient of all the evil intended against them by the country they had tried to serve; he was bearing the sahib's cross. And they fretted because they could do nothing for him in return; they felt so craven sitting on softness and attending the course of the law. "I wish to God I hadn't given my jewel of an assistant leave. I'ld cut my tongue out first. To feel I'm responsible, that's what hits me. To refuse, and then give in under pressure. That is what I did, my sons, that is what I did." Fielding took his pipe from his mouth and looked at it thoughtfully. Thinking him afraid, the other went on: "I understood an Englishman was to accompany the expedition. That is why I gave in." "No one blames you, my dear Callendar," said the Collector, looking down. "We are all to blame in the sense that we ought to have seen the expedition was insufficiently guaranteed, and stopped it. I knew about it myself; we lent our car this morning to take the ladies to the station. We are all implicated in that sense, but not an atom of blame attaches to you personally." "I don't feel that. I wish I could. Responsibility is a very awful thing, and I've no use for the man who shirks it." His eyes were directed on Fielding. Those who knew that Fielding had undertaken to accompany and missed the early train were sorry for him; it was what is to be expected when a man mixes himself up with natives; always ends in some indignity. The Collector, who knew more, kept silent, for the official in him still hoped that Fielding would toe the line. The conversation turned to women and children again, and under its cover Major Callendar got hold of the subaltern, and set him on to bait the schoolmaster. Pretending to be more drunk than he really was, he began to make semioffensive remarks. "Heard about Miss Quested's servant?" reinforced the Major. "No, what about him?" "Heaslop warned Miss Quested's servant last night never to lose sight of her. Prisoner got hold of this and managed to leave him behind. Bribed him. Heaslop has just found out the whole story, with names and sums--a well-known pimp to those people gave the money, Mohammed Latif by name. So much for the servant. What about the Englishman--our friend here? How did they get rid of him? Money again." Fielding rose to his feet, supported by murmurs and exclamations, for no one yet suspected his integrity. "Oh, I'm being misunderstood, apologies," said the Major offensively. "I didn't mean they bribed Mr.

Fielding." "Then what do you mean?" "They paid the other Indian to make you late--Godbole. He was saying his prayers. I know those prayers!" "That's ridiculous . . ." He sat down again, trembling with rage; person after person was being dragged into the mud. Having shot this bolt, the Major prepared the next. "Heaslop also found out something from his mother. Aziz paid a herd of natives to suffocate her in a cave. That was the end of her, or would have been only she got out. Nicely planned, wasn't it? Neat. Then he could go on with the girl. He and she and a guide, provided by the same Mohammed Latif. Guide now can't be found. Pretty." His voice broke into a roar. "It's not the time for sitting down. It's the time for action. Call in the troops and clear the bazaars." The Major's outbursts were always discounted, but he made everyone uneasy on this occasion. The crime was even worse than they had supposed--the unspeakable limit of cynicism, untouched since 1857. Fielding forgot his anger on poor old Godbole's behalf, and became thoughtful; the evil was propagating in every direction, it seemed to have an existence of its own, apart from anything that was done or said by individuals, and he understood better why both Aziz and Hamidullah had been inclined to lie down and die. His adversary saw that he was in trouble, and now ventured to say, "I suppose nothing that's said inside the club will go outside the club?" winking the while at Lesley. "Why should it?" responded Lesley. "Oh, nothing. I only heard a rumour that a certain member here present has been seeing the prisoner this afternoon. You can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, at least not in this country." "Does anyone here present want to?" Fielding was determined not to be drawn again. He had something to say, but it should be at his own moment. The attack failed to mature, because the Collector did not support it. Attention shifted from him for a time. Then the buzz of women broke out again. The door had been opened by Ronny. The young man looked exhausted and tragic, also gentler than usual. He always showed deference to his superiors, but now it came straight from his heart. He seemed to appeal for their protection in the insult that had befallen him, and they, in instinctive homage, rose to their feet. But every human act in the East is tainted with officialism, and while honouring him they condemned Aziz and India. Fielding realized this, and he remained seated. It was an ungracious, a caddish thing to do, perhaps an unsound thing to do, but he felt he had been passive long enough, and that he might be drawn into the wrong current if he did not make a stand. Ronny, who had not seen him, said in husky tones, "Oh, please-- please all sit down, I only want to listen what has been decided." "Heaslop, I'm telling them I'm against any show of force," said the Collector apologetically. "I don't know whether you will feel as I do, but that is how I am situated. When the verdict is obtained, it will be another nrttter." "You are sure to know best; I have no experience, Burra Sahib." "How is your mother, old boy?" "Better, thank you. I wish everyone would sit down." "Some have never got up," the young soldier said. "And the Major brings us an excellent report of Miss Quested," Turton went on. "I do, I do, I'm satisfied." "You thought badly of her earlier, did you not, Major? That's why I refused bail." Callendar laughed with friendly inwardness, and said, "Heaslop, Heaslop, next time bail's wanted, ring up the old doctor before giving it; his shoulders are broad, and, speaking in the strictest confidence, don't take the old doctor's opinion too seriously. He's a blithering idiot, we can always leave it at that, but he'll do the little he can towards keeping in quod the--" He broke off with affected politeness. "Oh, but he has one of his friends here." The subaltern called, "Stand up, you swine." "Mr. Fielding, what has prevented you from standing up?" said the Collector, entering the fray at last. It was the attack for which Fielding had waited, and to which he must reply. "May I make a statement, sir?" "Certainly." Seasoned and self-contained, devoid of the fervours of nationality or youth, the schoolmaster did what was for him a comparatively easy thing. He stood up and said, "I believe Dr. Aziz to be innocent." "You have a right to hold that opinion if you choose, but pray is that any reason why you should insult Mr. Heaslop?" "May I conclude my statement?" Certainly." "I am waiting for the verdict of the courts. If he is guilty I resign from my service, and leave India. I resign from the club now." "Hear, hear!" said voices, not entirely hostile, for they liked the fellow for speaking out. "You have not answered my question. Why did you not stand when Mr. Heaslop entered?" "With all deference, sir, I am not here to answer questions, but to make a personal statement, and I have concluded it." "May I ask whether you have taken over charge of this District?" Fielding moved towards the door. "One moment, Mr. Fielding. You are not to go yet, please. Before you leave the club, from which you do very well to resign, you will express some detestation of the crime, and you will apologize to Mr. Heaslop." "Are you speaking to me officially, sir?" The Collector, who never spoke otherwise, was so infuriated that he lost his head. He cried, "Leave this room at once, and I deeply regret that I demeaned myself to meet you at the station. You have sunk to the level of your associates; you are weak, weak, that is what is wrong with you--" "I want to leave the room, but cannot while this gentleman prevents me," said Fielding lightly; the subaltern had got across his path. "Let him go," said Ronny, almost in tears. It was the only appeal that could have saved the situation. Whatever Heaslop wished must be done. There was a slight scuffle at the door, from which Fielding was propelled, a little more quickly than is natural, into the room where the ladies were playing cards. "Fancy if I'd fallen or got angry," he thought. Of course he was a little angry. His peers had never offered him violence or called him weak before, besides Heaslop had heaped coals of fire on his head. He wished he had not picked the quarrel over poor suffering Heaslop, when there were cleaner issues at hand. However, there it was, done, muddled through, and to cool himself and regain mental balance he went on to the upper verandah for a moment, where the first object he saw was the Marabar Hills. At this distance and hour they leapt into beauty; they were Monsalvat, Walhalla, the towers of a cathedral, peopled with saints and heroes, and covered with flowers. What miscreant lurked in them, presently to be detected by the activities of the law? Who was the guide, and had he been found yet? What

was the "echo" of which the girl complained? He did not know, but presently he would know. Great is information, and she shall prevail. It was the last moment of the light, and as he gazed at the Marabar Hills they seemed to move graciously towards him like a queen, and their charm became the sky's. At the moment they vanished they were everywhere, the cool benediction of the night descended, the stars sparkled, and the whole universe was a hill. Lovely, exquisite moment--but passing the Englishman with averted face and on swift wings. He experienced nothing himself; it was as if someone had told him there was such a moment, and he was obliged to believe. And he felt dubious and discontented suddenly, and wondered whether he was really and truly successful as a human being. After forty years' experience, he had learnt to manage his life and make the best of it on advanced European lines, had developed his personality, explored his limitations, controlled his passions--and he had done it all without becoming either pedantic or worldly. A creditable achievement, but as the moment passed, he felt he ought to have been working at something else the whole time,--he didn't know at what, never would know, never could know, and that was why he felt sad.

CHAPTER XXI

Dismissing his regrets, as Inappropriate to the matter in hand, he accomplished the last section of the day by riding off to his new allies. He was glad that he had broken with the club, for he would have picked up scraps of gossip there, and reported them down in the city, and he was glad to be denied this opportunity. He would miss his billiards, and occasional tennis, and cracks with McBryde, but really that was all, so light did he travel. At the entrance of the bazaars, a tiger made his horse shy--a youth dressed up as a tiger, the body striped brown and yellow, a mask over the face. Mohurram was working up. The city beat a good many drums, but seemed good-tempered. He was invited to inspect a small tazia--a flimsy and frivolous erection, more like a crinoline than the tomb of the grandson of the Prophet, done to death at Kerbela. Excited children were pasting coloured paper over its ribs. The rest of the evening he spent with the Nawab Bahadur, Hamidullah, Mahmoud Ali, and others of the confederacy. The campaign was also working up. A telegram had been sent to the famous Amritrao, and his acceptance received. Application for bail was to be renewed--it could not well be withheld now that Miss Quested was out of danger. The conference was serious and sensible, but marred by a group of itinerant musicians, who were allowed to play in the compound. Each held a large earthenware jar, containing pebbles, and jerked it up and down in time to a doleful chant. Distracted by the noise, he suggested their dismissal, but the Nawab Bahadur vetoed it; he said that musicians, who had walked many miles, might bring good luck. Late at night, he had an inclination to tell Professor Godbole of the tactical and moral error he had made in being rude to Heaslop, and to hear what he would say. But the old fellow had gone to bed and slipped off unmolested to his new job in a day or two: he always did possess the knack of slipping off.

CHAPTER XXII

Adela lay for several days in the McBrydes' bungalow. She had been touched by the sun, also hundreds of cactus spines had to be picked out of her flesh. Hour after hour Miss Derek and Mrs. McBryde examined her through magnifying glasses, always coming on fresh colonies, tiny hairs that might snap off and be drawn into the blood if they were neglected. She lay passive beneath their fingers, which developed the shock that had begun in the cave. Hitherto she had not much minded whether she was touched or not: her senses were abnormally inert and the only contact she anticipated was that of mind. Everything now was transferred to the surface of her body, which began to avenge itself, and feed unhealthily. People seemed very much alike, except that some would come close while others kept away. "In space things touch, in time things part," she repeated to herself while the thorns were being extracted--her brain so weak that she could not decide whether the phrase was a philosophy or a pun. They were kind to her, indeed over-kind, the men too respectful, the women too sympathetic; whereas Mrs. Moore, the oniy visitor she wanted, kept away. No one understood her trouble, or knew why she vibrated between hard commonsense and hysteria. She would begin a speech as if nothing particular had happened. "I went into this detestable cave," she would say dryly, "and I remember scratching the wall with my finger-nail, to start the usual echo, and then as I was saying there was this shadow, or sort of shadow, down the entrance tunnel, bottling me up. It seemed like an age, but I suppose the whole thing can't have lasted thirty seconds really. I hit at him with the glasses, he pulled me round the cave by the strap, it broke, I escaped, that's all. He never actually touched me once. It all seems such nonsense." Then her eyes would fill with tears. "Naturally I'm upset, but I shall get over it." And then she would break down entirely, and the women would feel she was one of themselves and cry too, and men in the next room murmur: "Good God, good God!" No one realized that she thought tears vile, a degradation more subtle than anything endured in the Marabar, a negation of her advanced outlook and the natural honesty of her mind. Adela was always trying to "think the incident out," always reminding herself that no harm had been done. There was "the shock," but what is that? For a time her own logic would convince her, then she would hear the echo again, weep, declare she was unworthy of Ronny, and hope her assailant would get the maximum penalty. After one of these bouts, she longed to go out into the bazaars and ask pardon from everyone she met, for she felt in some vague way that she was leaving the world worse than she found it. She

felt that it was her crime, until the intellect, reawakening, pointed out to her that she was inaccurate here, and set her again upon her sterile round. If only she could have seen Mrs. Moore! The old lady had not been well either, and was disinclined to come out, Ronny reported. And consequently the echo flourished, raging up and down like a nerve in the faculty of her hearing, and the noise in the cave, so unimportant intellectually, was prolonged over the surface of her life. She had struck the polished wall--for no reason--and before the comment had died away, he followed her, and the climax was the falling of her field-glasses. The sound had spouted after her when she escaped, and was going on still like a river that gradually floods the plain. Only Mrs. Moore could drive it back to its source and seal the broken reservoir. Evil was loose . . . she could even hear it entering the lives of others. . . . And Adela spent days in this atmosphere of grief and depression. Her friends kept up their spirits by demanding holocausts of natives, but she was too worried and weak to do that. When the cactus thorns had all been extracted, and her temperature fallen to normal, Ronny came to fetch her away. He was worn with indignation and suffering, and she wished she could comfort him; but intimacy seemed to caricature itself, and the more they spoke the more wretched and self-conscious they became. Practical talk was the least painful, and he and McBryde now told her one or two things which they had concealed from her during the crisis, by the doctor's orders. She learnt for the first time of the Mohurram troubles. There had nearly been a riot. The last day of the festival, the great procession left its official route, and tried to enter the civil station, and a telephone had been cut because it interrupted the advance of one of the larger paper towers. McBryde and his police had pulled the thing straight--a fine piece of work. They passed on to another and very painful subject: the trial. She would have to appear in court, identify the prisoner, and submit to cross-examination by an Indian lawyer. "Can Mrs. Moore be with me?" was all she said. "Certainly, and I shall be there myself," Ronny replied. "The case won't come before me; they've objected to me on personal grounds. It will be at Chandrapore--we thought at one time it would be transferred elsewhere." "Miss Quested realizes what all that means, though," said McBryde sadly. "The case will come before Das." Das was Ronny's assistant--own brother to the Mrs. Bhattacharya whose carriage had played them false last month. He was courteous and intelligent, and with the evidence before him could only come to one conclusion; but that he should be judge over an English girl had convulsed the station with wrath, and some of the women had sent a telegram about it to Lady Mellanby, the wife of the Lieutenant-Governor. "I must come before someone." "That's--that's the way to face it. You have the pluck, Miss Quested." He grew very bitter over the arrangements, and called them "the fruits of democracy." In the old days an Englishwoman would not have had to appear, nor would any Indian have dared to discuss her private affairs. She would have made her deposition, and judgment would have followed. He apologized to her for the condition of the country, with the result that she gave one of her sudden little shoots of tears. Ronny wandered miserably about the room while she cried, treading upon the flowers of the Kashmir carpet that so inevitably covered it or drumming on the brass Benares bowls. "I do this less every day, I shall soon be quite well," she said, blowing her nose and feeling hideous. "What I need is something to do. That is why I keep on with this ridiculous crying." "It's not ridiculous, we think you wonderful," said the policeman very sincerely. "It only bothers us that we can't help you more. Your stopping here--at such a time--is the greatest honour this house--" He too was overcome with emotion. "By the way, a letter came here for you while you were ill," he continued. "I opened it, which is a strange confession to make. Will you forgive me? The circumstances are peculiar. It is from Fielding." "Why should he write to me?" "A most lamentable thing has happened. The defence got hold of him." "He's a crank, a crank," said Ronny lightly. "That's your way of putting it, but a man can be a crank without being a cad. Miss Quested had better know how he behaved to you. If you don't tell her, somebody else will." He told her. "He is now the mainstay of the defence, I needn't add. He is the one righteous Englishman in a horde of tyrants. He receives deputations from the bazaar, and they all chew betel nut and swear one another's hands with scent. It is not easy to enter into the mind of such a man. His students are on strike--out of enthusiasm for him they won't learn their lessons. If it weren't for Fielding one would never have had the Mohurram trouble. He has done a very grave disservice to the whole community. The letter lay here a day or two, waiting till you were well enough, then the situation got so grave that I decided to open it in case it was useful to us." "Is it?" she said feebly. "Not at all. He only has the impertinence to suggest you have made a mistake." "Would that I had!" She glanced through the letter, which was careful and formal in its wording. "Dr. Aziz is innocent," she read. Then her voice began to tremble again. "But think of his behaviour to you, Ronny. When you had already to bear so much for my sake! It was shocking of him. My dear, how can I repay you? How can one repay when one has nothing to give? What is the use of personal relationships when everyone brings less and less to them? I feel we ought all to go back into the desert for centuries and try and get good. I want to begin at the beginning. All the things I thought I'd learnt are just a hindrance, they're not knowledge at all. I'm not fit for personal relationships. Well, let's go, let's go. Of course Mr. Fielding's letter doesn't count; he can think and write what he likes, only he shouldn't have been rude to you when you had so much to bear. That's what matters. . . . I don't want your arm, I'm a magnificent walker, so don't touch me, please." Mrs. McBryde wished her an affectionate good-bye--a woman with whom she had nothing in common and whose intimacy oppressed her. They would have to meet now, year after year, until one of their husbands was superannuated. Truly Anglo-India had caught her with a vengeance and perhaps it served her right for having tried to take up a line of her own. Humbled yet repelled, she gave thanks. "Oh, we must help one another, we must take the rough with the smooth," said Mrs. McBryde. Miss Derek was there too, still making

jokes about her comic Maharajah and Rani. Required as a witness at the trial, she had refused to send back the Mudkul car; they would be frightfully sick. Both Mrs. McBryde and Miss Derek kissed her, and called her by her Christian name. Then Ronny drove her back. It was early in the morning, for the day, as the hot weather advanced, swelled like a monster at both ends, and left less and less room for the movements of mortals. As they neared his bungalow, he said: "Mother's looking forward to seeing you, but of course she's old, one mustn't forget that. Old people never take things as one expects, in my opinion." He seemed warning her against approaching disappointment, but she took no notice. Her friendship with Mrs. Moore was so deep and real that she felt sure it would last, whatever else happened. "What can I do to make things easier for you? It's you who matter," she sighed. "Dear old girl to say so." "Dear old boy." Then she cried: "Ronny, she isn't ill too?" He reassured her; Major Callencler was not dissatisfied. "But you'll find her--irritable. We are an irritable family. Well, you'll see for yourself. No doubt my own nerves are out of order, and I expected more from mother when I came in from the office than she felt able to give. She is sure to make a special effort for you; still, I don't want your home-coming to be a disappointing one. Don't expect too much." The house came in sight. It was a replica of the bungalow she had left. Puffy, red, and curiously severe, Mrs. Moore was revealed upon a sofa. She didn't get up when they entered, and the surprise of this roused Adela from her own troubles. "Here you are both back," was the only greeting. Adela sat down and took her hand. It withdrew, and she felt that just as others repelled her, so did she repel Mrs. Moore. "Are you all right? You appeared all right when I left," said Ronny, trying not to speak crossly, but he had instructed her to give the girl a pleasant welcome, and he could not but feel annoyed. "I am all right," she said heavily. "As a matter of fact I have been looking at my return ticket. It is interchangeable, so I have a much larger choice of boats home than I thought." "We can go into that later, can't we?" "Ralph and Stella may be wanting to know when I arrive." "There is plenty of time for all such plans. How do you think our Adela looks?" "I am counting on you to help me through; it is such a blessing to be with you again, everyone else is a stranger," said the girl rapidly. But Mrs. Moore showed no inclination to be helpful. A sort of resentment emanated from her. She seemed to say: "Am I to be bothered for ever?" Her Christian tenderness had gone, or had developed into a hardness, a just irritation against the human race; she had taken no interest at the arrest, asked scarcely any questions, and had refused to leave her bed on the awful last night of Mohurram, when an attack was expected on the bungalow. "I know it's all nothing; I must be sensible, I do try--" Adela continued, working again towards tears. "I shouldn't mind if it had happened anywhere else; at least I really don't know where it did happen." Ronny supposed that he understood what she meant: she could not identify or describe the particular cave, indeed almost refused to have her mind cleared up about it, and it was recognized that the defence would try to make capital out of this during the trial. He reassured her: the Marabar caves were notoriously like one another; indeed, in the future they were to be numbered in sequence with white paint. "Yes, I mean that, at least not exactly; but there is this echo that I keep on hearing." "Oh, what of the echo?" asked Mrs. Moore, paying attention to her for the first time. I can't get rid of it." "I don't suppose you ever will." Ronny had emphasized to his mother that Adela would arrive in a morbid state, yet she was being positively malicious. "Mrs. Moore, what is this echo?" "Don't you know?" "No--what is it? oh, do say! I felt you would be able to explain it . . . this will comfort me so. . . ." "If you don't know, you don't know; I can't tell you." "I think you're rather unkind not to say." "Say, say, say," said the old lady bitterly. "As if anything can be said! I have spent my life in saying or in listening to sayings; I have listened too much. It is time I was left in peace. Not to die," she added sourly. "No doubt you expect me to die, but when I have seen you and Ronny married, and seen the other two and whether they want to be married--I'll retire then into a cave of my own." She smiled, to bring down her remark into ordinary life and thus add to its bitterness. "Somewhere where no young people will come asking questions and expecting answers. Some shelf." "Quite so, but meantime a trial is coming on," said her son hotly, "and the notion of most of us is that we'd better pull together and help one another through, instead of being disagreeable. Are you going to talk like that in the witness-box?" "Why should I be in the witness-box?" "To confirm certain points in our evidence." "I have nothing to do with your ludicrous law courts," she said, angry. "I will not be dragged in at all." "I won't have her dragged in, either! I won't have any more trouble on my account," cried Adela, and again took the hand, which was again withdrawn. "Her evidence is not the least essential." "I thought she would want to give it. No one blames you, mother, but the fact remains that you dropped off at the first cave, and encouraged Adela to go on with him alone, whereas if you'd been well enough to keep on too nothing would have happened. He planned it, I know. Still, you fell into his trap just like Fielding and Antony before you. . . . Forgive me for speaking so plainly, but you've no right to take up this high and mighty attitude about law courts. If you're ill, that's different; but you say you're all right and you seem so, in which case I thought you'ld want to take your part, I did really." "I'll not have you worry her whether she's well or ill," said Adela, leaving the sofa and taking his arm; then dropped it with a sigh and sat down again. But he was pleased she had rallied to him and surveyed his mother patronizingly. He had never felt easy with her. She was by no means the dear old lady outsiders supposed, and India had brought her into the open. "I shall attend your marriage, but not your trial," she informed them, tapping her knee; she had become very restless, and rather ungraceful. "Then I shall go to England." "You can't go to England in May, as you agreed." "I have changed my mind." "Well, we'd better end this unexpected wrangle," said the young man, striding about. "You appear to want to be left out of everything, and that's enough." "My body, my miserable body," she sighed. "Why isn't it strong? Oh, why can't I walk away and be gone? Why can't

I finish my duties and be gone? Why do I get headaches and puff when I walk? And all the time this to do and that to do and this to do in your way and that to do in her way, and everything sympathy and confusion and bearing one another's burdens. Why can't this be done and that be done in my way and they be done and I at peace? Why has anything to be done, I cannot see. Why all this marriage, marriage? . . . The human race would have become a single person centuries ago if marriage was any use. And all this rubbish about love, love in a church, love in a cave, as if there is the least difference, and I held up from my business over such trifles!" "What do you want?" he said, exasperated. "Can you state it in simple language? If so, do." "I want my pack of patience cards." "Very well, get them." He found, as he expected, that the poor girl was crying. And, as always, an Indian close outside the window, a mali in this case, picking up sounds. Much upset, he sat silent for a moment, thinking over his mother and her senile intrusions. He wished he had never asked her to visit India, or become under any obligation to her. "Well, my dear girl, this isn't much of a home-coming," he said at last. "I had no idea she had this up her sleeve." Adela had stopped crying. An extraordinary expression was on her face, half relief, half horror. She repeated, "Aziz, Aziz." They all avoided mentioning that name. It had become synonymous with the power of evil. He was "the prisoner," "the person in question," "the defence," and the sound of it now rang out like the first note of a new symphony. "Aziz . . . have I made a mistake?" "You're over-tired," he cried, not much surprised. "Ronny, he's innocent; I made an awful mistake." "Well, sit down anyhow." He looked round the room, but only two sparrows were chasing one another. She obeyed and took hold of his hand. He stroked it and she smiled, and gasped as if she had risen to the surface of the water, then touched her ear. "My echo's better." "That's good. You'll be perfectly well in a few days, but you must save yourself up for the trial. Das is a very good fellow, we shall all be with you." "But Ronny, dear Ronny, perhaps there oughtn't to be any trial." "I don't quite know what you're saying, and I don't think you do." "If Dr. Aziz never did it he ought to be let out." A shiver like impending death passed over Ronny. He said hurriedly, "He was let out--until the Mohurram riot, when he had to be put in again." To divert her, he told her the story, which was held to be amusing. Nureddin had stolen the Nawab Bahadur's car and driven Aziz into a ditch in the dark. Both of them had fallen out, and Nureddin had cut his face open. Their wailing had been drowned by the cries of the faithful, and it was quite a time before they were rescued by the police. Nureddin was taken to the Minto Hospital, Aziz restored to prison, with an additional charge against him of disturbing the public peace. "Half a minute," he remarked when the anecdote was over, and went to the telephone to ask Callendar to look in as soon as he found it convenient, because she hadn't borne the journey well. When he returned, she was in a nervous crisis, but it took a different form--she clung to him, and sobbed, "Help me to do what I ought. Aziz is good. You heard your mother say so." "Heard what?" "He's good; I've been so wrong to accuse him." "Mother never said so." "Didn't she?" she asked, quite reasonable, open to every suggestion anyway. "She never mentioned that name once." "But, Ronny, I heard her." "Pure illusion. You can't be quite well, can you, to make up a thing like that." "I suppose I can't. How amazing of me!" "I was listening to all she said, as far as it could be listened to; she gets very incoherent." "When her voice dropped she said it--towards the end, when she talked about love--love--I couldn't follow, but just then she said: 'Doctor Aziz never did it.'" "Those words?" "The idea more than the words." "Never, never, my dear girl. Complete illusion. His name was not mentioned by anyone. Look here--you are confusing this with Fielding's letter." "That's it, that's it," she cried, greatly relieved. "I knew I'd heard his name somewhere. I am so grateful to you for clearing this up--it's the sort of mistake that worries me, and proves I'm neurotic." "So you won't go saying he's innocent again, will you? for every servant I've got is a spy." He went to the window. The mali had gone, or rather had turned into two small children--impossible they should know English, but he sent them packing. "They all hate us," he explained. "It'll be all right after the verdict, for I will say this for them, they do accept the accomplished fact; but at present they're pouring out money like water to catch us tripping, and a remark like yours is the very thing they look out for. It would enable them to say it was a put-up job on the part of us officials. You see what I mean." Mrs. Moore came back, with the same air of ill-temper, and sat down with a flump by the card-table. To clear the confusion up, Ronny asked her point-blank whether she had mentioned the prisoner. She could not understand the question and the reason of it had to be explained. She replied: "I never said his name," and began to play patience. "I thought you said, 'Aziz is an innocent man,' but it was in Mr. Fielding's letter." "Of course he is innocent," she answered indifferently: it was the first time she had expressed an opinion on the point. "You see, Ronny, I was right," said the girl. "You were not right, she never said it." "But she thinks it." "Who cares what she thinks?" "Red nine on black ten--" from the card-table. "She can think, and Fielding too, but there's such a thing as evidence, I suppose." "I know, but--" "Is it again my duty to talk?" asked Mrs. Moore, looking up. "Apparently, as you keep interrupting me." "Only if you have anything sensible to say." "Oh, how tedious . . . trivial . . ." and as when she had scoffed at love, love, love, her mind seemed to move towards them from a great distance and out of darkness. "Oh, why is everything still my duty? when shall I be free from your fuss? Was he in the cave and were you in the cave and on and on . . . and Unto us a Son is born, unto us a Child is given . . . and am I good and is he bad and are we saved? . . . and ending everything the echo." "I don't hear it so much," said Adela, moving towards her. "You send it away, you do nothing but good, you are so good." "I am not good, no, bad." She spoke more calmly and resumed her cards, saying as she turned them up, "A bad old woman, bad, bad, detestable. I used to be good with the children growing up, also I meet this young man in his mosque, I wanted him to be happy. Good, happy, small people. They do not exist, they were a dream. . . . But I will not help you to torture him for what he never did. There

are different ways of evil and I prefer mine to yours." "Have you any evidence in the prisoner's favour?" said Ronny in the tones of the just official. "If so, it is your bounden duty to go into the witness-box for him instead of for us. No one will stop you." "One knows people's characters, as you call them," she retorted disdainfully, as if she really knew more than character but could not impart it. "I have heard both English and Indians speak well of him, and I felt it isn't the sort of thing he would do." "Feeble, mother, feeble." "Most feeble." "And most inconsiderate to Adela." Adela said: "It would be so appalling if I was wrong. I should take my own life." He turned on her with: "What was I warning you just now? You know you're right, and the whole station knows it." "Yes, he . . . This is very, very awful. I'm as certain as ever he followed me . . . only, wouldn't it be possible to withdraw the case? I dread the idea of giving evidence more and more, and you are all so good to women here and you have so much more power than in England--look at Miss Derek's motor-car. Oh, of course it's out of the question, I'm ashamed to have mentioned it; please forgive me." "That's all right," he said inadequately. "Of course I forgive you, as you call it. But the case has to come before a magistrate now; it really must, the machinery has started." "She has started the machinery; it will work to its end." Adela inclined towards tears in consequence of this unkind remark, and Ronny picked up the list of steamship sailings with an excellent notion in his head. His mother ought to leave India at once: she was doing no good to herself or to anyone else there.

CHAPTER XXIII

Lady Mellanby, wife to the Lieutenant-Governor of the Province, had been gratified by the appeal addressed to her by the ladies of Chandrapore. She could not do anything--besides, she was sailing for England; but she desired to be informed if she could show sympathy in any other way. Mrs. Turton replied that Mr. Heaslop's mother was trying to get a passage, but had delayed too long, and all the boats were full; could Lady Mellanby use her influence? Not even Lady Mellanby could expand the dimensions of a P. and 0., but she was a very, very nice woman, and she actually wired offering the unknown and obscure old lady accommodation in her own reserved cabin. It was like a gift from heaven; humble and grateful, Ronny could not but reflect that there are compensations for every woe. His name was familiar at Government House owing to poor Adela, and now Mrs. Moore would stamp it on Lady Mellanby's imagination, as they journeyed across the Indian Ocean and up the Red Sea. He had a return of tenderness for his mother--as we do for our relatives when they receive conspicuous and unexpected honour. She was not negligible, she could still arrest the attention of a high official's wife. So Mrs. Moore had all she wished; she escaped the trial, the marriage, and the hot weather; she would return to England in comfort and distinction, and see her other children. At her son's suggestion, and by her own desire, she departed. But she accepted her good luck without enthusiasm. She had come to that state where the horror of the universe and its smallness are both visible at the same time--the twilight of the double vision in which so many elderly people are involved. If this world is not to our taste, well, at all events there is Heaven, Hell, Annihilation-one or other of those large things, that huge scenic background of stars, fires, blue or black air. All heroic endeavour, and all that is known as art, assumes that there is such a background, just as all practical endeavour, when the world is to our taste, assumes that the world is all. But in the twilight of the double vision, a spiritual muddledom is set up for which no high-sounding words can be found; we can neither act nor refrain from action, we can neither ignore nor respect Infinity. Mrs. Moore had always inclined to resignation. As soon as she landed in India it seemed to her good, and when she saw the water flowing through the mosque-tank, or the Ganges, or the moon, caught in the shawl of night with all the other stars, it seemed a beautiful goal and an easy one. To be one with the universe! So dignified and simple. But there was always some little duty to be performed first, some new card to be turned up from the diminishing pack and placed, and while she was pottering about, the Marabar struck its gong. What had spoken to her in that scoured-out cavity of the granite? What dwelt in the first of the caves? Something very old and very small. Before time, it was before space also. Something snub-nosed, incapable of generosity--the undying worm itself. Since hearing its voice, she had not entertained one large thought, she was actually envious of Adela. All this fuss over a frightened girl! Nothing had happened, "and if it had," she found herself thinking with the cynicism of a withered priestess, "if it had, there are worse evils than love." The unspeakable attempt presented itself to her as love: in a cave, in a church--Bourn, it amounts to the same. Visions are supposed to entail profundity, but-- Wait till you get one, dear reader! The abyss also may be petty, the serpent of eternity made of maggots; her constant thought was: "Less attention should be paid to my future daughter-in-law and more to me, there is no sorrow like my sorrow," although when the attention was paid she rejected it irritably. Her son couldn't escort her to Bombay, for the local situation continued acute, and all officials had to remain at their posts. Antony couldn't come either, in case he never returned to give his evidence. So she travelled with no one who could remind her of the past. This was a relief. The heat had drawn back a little before its next advance, and the journey was not unpleasant. As she left Chandrapore the moon, full again, shone over the Ganges and touched the shrinking channels into threads of silver, then veered and looked into her window. The swift and comfortable mail-train slid with her through the night, and all the next day she was rushing through Central India, through landscapes that were baked and bleached but had not the hopeless melancholy of the plain. She watched the indestructible life of man and his changing faces, and the houses he has built for himself and God, and they appeared to her not in terms of her

own trouble but as things to see. There was, for instance, a place called Asirgarh which she passed at sunset and identified on a map--an enormous fortress among wooded hills. No one had ever mentioned Asirgarh to her, but it had huge and noble bastions and to the right of them was a mosque. She forgot it. Ten minutes later, Asirgarh reappeared. The mosque was to the left of the bastions now. The train in its descent through the Vindyas had described a semicircle round Asirgarh. 'What could she connect it with except its own name? Nothing; she knew no one who lived there. But it had looked at her twice and seemed to say: "I do not vanish." She woke in the middle of the night with a start, for the train was falling over the western cliff. Moonlit pinnacles rushed up at her like the fringes of a sea; then a brief episode of plain, the real sea, and the soupy dawn of Bombay. "I have not seen the right places," she thought, as she saw embayed in the platforms of the Victoria Terminus the end of the rails that had carried her over a continent and could never carry her back. She would never visit Asirgarh or the other untouched places; neither Delhi nor Agra nor the Rajputana cities nor Kashmir, nor the obscurer marvels that had sometimes shone through men's speech: the bilingual rock of Girnar, the statue of Shri Belgola, the ruins of Mandu and Hampi, temples of Khajraha, gardens of Shalimar. As she drove through the huge city which the West has built and abandoned with a gesture of despair, she longed to stop, though it was only Bombay, and disentangle the hundred Indias that passed each other in its streets. The feet of the horses moved her on, and presently the boat sailed and thousands of coconut palms appeared all round the anchorage and climbed the hills to wave her farewell. "So you thought an echo was India; you took the Marabar caves as final?" they laughed. "What have we in common with them, or they with Asirgarh? Good-bye!" Then the steamer rounded Colaba, the continent swung about, the cliff of the Ghats melted into the haze of a tropic sea. Lady Mellanby turned up and advised her not to stand in the heat: "We are safely out of the frying-pan," said Lady Mellanby, "it will never do to fall into the fire."

CHAPTER XXIV

Making sudden changes of gear, the heat accelerated its advance after Mrs. Moore's departure until existence had to be endured and crime punished with the thermometer at a hundred and twelve. Electric fans hummed and spat, water splashed on to screens, ice clinked, and outside these defences, between a greyish sky and a yellowish earth, clouds of dust moved hesitatingly. In Europe life retreats out of the cold, and exquisite fireside myths have resulted--Balder, Persephone--but here the retreat is from the source of life, the treacherous sun, and no poetry adorns it because disillusionment cannot be beautiful. Men yearn for poetry though they may not confess it; they desire that joy shall be graceful and sorrow august and infinity have a form, and India fails to accommodate them. The annual helter-skelter of April, when irritability and lust spread like a canker, is one of her comments on the orderly hopes of humanity. Fish manage better; fish, as the tanks dry, wriggle into the mud and wait for the rains to uncake them. But men try to be harmonious all the year round, and the results are occasionally disastrous. The triumphant machine of civilization may suddenly hitch and be immobilized into a car of stone, and at such moments the destiny of the English seems to resemble their predecessors', who also entered the country with intent to refashion it, but were in the end worked into its pattern and covered with its dust. Adela, after years of intellectualism, had resumed her morning kneel to Christianity. There seemed no harm in it, it was the shortest and easiest cut to the unseen, and she could tack her troubles on to it. Just as the Hindu clerks asked Lakshmi for an increase in pay, so did she implore Jehovah for a favourable verdict. God who saves the King will surely support the police. Her deity returned a consoling reply, but the touch of her hands on her face started prickly heat, and she seemed to swallow and expectorate the same insipid clot of air that had weighed on her lungs all the night. Also the voice of Mrs. Turton disturbed her. "Are you ready, young lady?" it pealed from the next room. "Half a minute," she murmured. The Turtons had received her after Mrs. Moore left. Their kindness was incredible, but it was her position not her character that moved them; she was the English girl who had had the terrible experience, and for whom too much could not be done. No one, except Ronny, had any idea of what passed in her mind, and he only dimly, for where there is officialism every human relationship suffers. In her sadness she said to him, "I bring you nothing but trouble; I was right on the Maidan, we had better just be friends," but he protested, for the more she suffered the more highly he valued her. Did she love him? This question was somehow draggled up with the Marabar, it had been in her mind as she entered the fatal cave. Was she capable of loving anyone? "Miss Quested, Adela, what d'ye call yourself, it's half-past seven; we ought to think of starting for that Court when you feel inclined." "She's saying her prayers," came the Collector's voice. "Sorry, my dear; take your time. . . . Was your chota hazri all right?" "I can't eat; might I have a little brandy?" she asked, deserting Jehovah. When it was brought, she shuddered, and said she was ready to go. "Drink it up; not a bad notion, a peg." "I don't think it'll really help me, Burra Sahib." "You sent brandy down to the Court, didn't you, Mary?" "I should think I did, champagne too." "I'll thank you this evening, I'm all to pieces now," said the girl, forming each syllable carefully as if her trouble would diminish if it were accurately defined. She was afraid of reticence, in case something that she herself did not perceive took shape beneath it, and she had rehearsed with Mr. McBryde in an odd, mincing way her terrible adventure in the cave, how the man had never actually touched her but dragged her about, and so on. Her aim this morning was to announce, meticulously, that the strain was appalling, and she would probably break down under Mr. Amritrao's cross-examination and disgrace her friends. "My echo has come back again badly," she told them. "How about

aspirin?" "It is not a headache, it is an echo." Unable to dispel the buzzing in her ears, Major Callendar had diagnosed it as a fancy, which must not be encouraged. So the Turtons changed the subject. The cool little lick of the breeze was passing over the earth, dividing night from day; it would fail in ten minutes, but they might profit by it for their drive down into the city. "I am sure to break down," she repeated. "You won't," said the Collector, his voice full of tenderness. "Of course she won't, she's a real sport." "But, Mrs. Turton . . ." "Yes, my dear child?" "If I do break down, it is of no consequence. It would flatter in some trials, not in this. I put it to myself in the following way: I can really behave as I like, cry, be absurd, I am sure to get my verdict, unless Mr. Das is most frightfully unjust." "You're bound to win," he said calmly, and did not remind her that there was bound to be an appeal. The Nawab Bahadur bad financed the defence, and would ruin himself sooner than let an "innocent Moslem perish," and other interests, less reputable, were in the background too. The case might go up from court to court, with consequences that no official could foresee. Under his very eyes, the temper of Chandrapore was altering. As his car turned out of the compound, there was a tap of silly anger on its paint--a pebble thrown by a child. Some larger stones were dropped near the mosque. In the Maidan, a squad of native police on motor cycles waited to escort them through the bazaars. The Collector was irritated and muttered, "McBryde's an old woman"; but Mrs. Turton said, "Really, after Mohurram a show of force will do no harm; it's ridiculous to pretend they don't hate us; do give up that farce." He replied in an odd, sad voice, "I don't hate them, I don't know why," and he didn't hate them; for if he did, he would have had to condemn his own career as a bad investment. He retained a contemptuous affection for the pawns he had moved about for so many years, they must be worth his pains. "After all, it's our women who make everything more difficult out here," was his inmost thought, as he caught sight of some obscenities upon a long blank wall, and beneath his chivalry to Miss Quested resentment lurked, waiting its day--perhaps there is a grain of resentment in all chivalry. Some students had gathered in front of the City Magistrate's Court--hysterical boys whom he would have faced if alone, but he told the driver to work round to the rear of the building. The students jeered, and Rafi (hiding behind a comrade that he might not be identified) called out the English were cowards. They gained Ronny's private room, where a group of their own sort had collected. None were cowardly, all nervy, for queer reports kept coming in. The Sweepers had just struck, and half the commodes of Chandrapore remained desolate in consequence-only half, and Sweepers from the District, who felt less strongly about the innocence of Dr. Aziz, would arrive in the afternoon, and break the strike, but why should the grotesque incident occur? And a number of Mohammedan ladies had sworn to take no food until the prisoner was acquitted; their death would make little difference, indeed, being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting. A new spirit seemed abroad, a rearrangement, which no one in the stern little band of whites could explain. There was a tendency to see Fielding at the back of it: the idea that he was weak and cranky had been dropped. They abused Fielding vigorously: he had been seen driving up with the two counsels, Amritrao and Mahmoud Ali; he encouraged the Boy Scout movement for seditious reasons; he received letters with foreign stamps on them, and was probably a Japanese spy. This morning's verdict would break the renegade, but he had done his country and the Empire incalculable disservice. While they denounced him, Miss Quested lay back with her hands on the arms of her chair and her eyes closed, reserving her strength. They noticed her after a time, and felt ashamed of making so much noise. "Can we do nothing for you?" Miss Derek said. "I don't think so, Nancy, and I seem able to do nothing for myself." "But you're strictly forbidden to talk like that; you're wonderful." "Yes, indeed," came the reverent chorus. "My old Das is all right," said Ronny, starting a new subject in low tones. "Not one of them's all right," contradicted Major Callendar. "Das is, really." "You mean he's more frightened of acquitting than convicting, because if he acquits he'll lose his job," said Lesley with a clever little laugh. Ronny did mean that, but he cherished "illusions" about his own subordinates (following the finer traditions of his service here), and he liked to maintain that his old Das really did possess moral courage of the Public School brand. He pointed out that--from one point of view--it was good that an Indian was taking the case. Conviction was inevitable; so better let an Indian pronounce it, there would be less fuss in the long run. Interested in the argument, he let Adela become dim in his mind. "In fact, you disapprove of the appeal I forwarded to Lady Mellanby," said Mrs. Turton with considerable heat. "Pray don't apologize, Mr. Heaslop; I am accustomed to being in the wrong." "I didn't mean that . . ." "All right. I said don't apologize." "Those swine are always on the lookout for a grievance," said Lesley, to propitiate her. "Swine, I should think so," the Major echoed. "And what's more, I'll tell you what. What's happened is a damn good thing really, barring of course its application to present company. It'll make them squeal and it's time they did squeal. I've put the fear of God into them at the hospital anyhow. You should see the grandson of our so-called leading loyalist." He tittered brutally as he described poor Nureddin's present appearance. "His beauty's gone, five upper teeth, two lower and a nostril. . . . Old Panna Lal brought him the looking-glass yesterday and he blubbered. . . . I laughed; I laughed, I tell you, and so would you; that used to be one of these buck niggers, I thought, now lie's all septic; damn him, blast his soul--er--I believe he was unspeakably immoral--er--" He subsided, nudged in the ribs, but added, "I wish I'd had the cutting up of my late assistant too; nothing's too bad for these people." "At last some sense is being talked," Mrs. Turton cried, much to her husband's discomfort. "That's what I say; I say there's not such a thing as cruelty after a thing like this." "Exactly, and remember it afterwards, you men. You're weak, weak, weak. Why, they ought to crawl from here to the caves on their hands and knees whenever an Englishwoman's in sight, they oughtn't to be spoken to, they ought to be spat at, they ought to be ground into the dust, we've

been far too kind with our Bridge Parties and the rest." She paused. Profiting by her wrath, the heat had invaded her. She subsided into a lemon squash, and continued between the sips to murmur, "Weak, weak." And the process was repeated. The issues Miss Quested had raised were so much more important than she was herself that people inevitably forgot her. Presently the case was called. Their chairs preceded them into the Court, for it was important that they should look dignified. And when the chuprassies had made all ready, they filed into the ramshackly room with a condescending air, as if it was a booth at a fair. The Collector made a small official joke as he sat down, at which his entourage smiled, and the Indians, who could not hear what he said, felt that some new cruelty was afoot, otherwise the sahibs would not chuckle. The Court was crowded and of course very hot, and the first person Adela noticed in it was the humblest of all who were present, a person who had no bearing officially upon the trial: the man who pulled the punkah. Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform near the back, in the middle of the central gangway, and he caught her attention as she came in, and he seemed to control the proceedings. He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god--not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impress her. This man would have been notable anywhere: among the thin-hammed, flat-chested mediocrities of Chandrapore he stood out as divine, yet he was of the city, its garbage had nourished him, he would end on its rubbish heaps. Pulling the rope towards him, relaxing it rhythmically, sending swirls of air over others, receiving none himself, he seemed apart from human destinies, a male fate, a winnower of souls. Opposite him, also on a platform, sat the little assistant magistrate, cultivated, self-conscious, and conscientious. The punkah, wallah was none of these things: he scarcely knew that he existed and did not understand why the Court was fuller than usual, indeed he did not know that it was fuller than usual, didn't even know he worked a fan, though he thought he pulled a rope. Something in his aloofness impressed the girl from middle-class England, and rebuked the narrowness of her sufferings. In virtue of what had she collected this roomful of people together? Her particular brand of opinions, and the suburban Jehovah who sanctified them--by what right did they claim so much importance in the world, and assume the title of civilization? Mrs. Moore--she looked round, but Mrs. Moore was far away on the sea; it was the kind of question they might have discussed on the voyage out before the old lady had turned disagreeable and queer. While thinking of Mrs. Moore she heard sounds, which gradually grew more distinct. The epoch-making trial had started, and the Superintendent of Police was opening the case for the prosecution. Mr. McBryde was not at pains to be an interesting speaker; he left eloquence to the defence, who would require it. His attitude was, "Everyone knows the man's guilty, and I am obliged to say so in public before he goes to the Andamans." He made no moral or emotional appeal, and it was only by degrees that the studied negligence of his manner made itself felt, and lashed part of the audience to fury. Laboriously did he describe the genesis of the picnic. The prisoner had met Miss Quested at an entertainment given by the Principal of Government College, and had there conceived his intentions concerning her: prisoner was a man of loose life, as documents found upon him at his arrest would testify, also his fellow-assistant, Dr. Panna Lal, was in a position to throw light on his character, and Major Callendar himself would speak. Here Mr. McBryde paused. He wanted to keep the proceedings as clean as possible, but Oriental Pathology, his favourite theme, lay around him, and he could not resist it. Taking off his spectacles, as was his habit before enunciating a general truth, he looked into them sadly, and remarked that the darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not _vice versa_--not a matter for bitterness this, not a matter for abuse, but just a fact which any scientific observer will confirm. "Even when the lady is so uglier than the gentleman?" The comment fell from nowhere, from the ceiling perhaps. It was the first interruption, and the Magistrate felt bound to censure it. "Turn that man out," he said. One of the native policemen took hold of a man who had said nothing, and turned him out roughly. Mr. McBryde resumed his spectacles and proceeded. But the comment had upset Miss Quested. Her body resented being called ugly, and trembled. "Do you feel faint, Adela?" asked Miss Derek, who tended her with loving indignation. "I never feel anything else, Nancy. I shall get through, but it's awful, awful." This led to the first of a series of scenes. Her friends began to fuss around her, and the Major called out, "I must have better arrangements than this made for my patient; why isn't she given a seat on the platform? She gets no air." Mr. Das looked annoyed and said: "I shall be happy to accommodate Miss Quested with a chair up here in view of the particular circumstances of her health." The chuprassies passed up not one chair but several, and the entire party followed Adela on to the platform, Mr. Fielding being the only European who remained in the body of the hall. "That's better," remarked Mrs. Turton, as she settled herself. "Thoroughly desirable change for several reasons," replied the Major. The Magistrate knew that he ought to censure this remark, but did not dare to. Callendar saw that he was afraid, and called out authoritatively, "Right, McBryde, go ahead now; sorry to have interrupted you." "Are you all right yourselves?" asked the Superintendent. "We shall do, we shall do." "Go on, Mr. Das, we are not here to disturb you," said the Collector patronizingly. Indeed, they had not so much disturbed the trial as taken charge of it. While the prosecution continued, Miss Quested examined the hall--timidly at first, as though it would scorch her eyes. She observed to left and right of the punkah man many a half-known face. Beneath her were gathered all the wreckage of her silly attempt to see India-- the people she had met at the Bridge Party, the man and his wife who hadn't sent their carriage, the old man who would lend his car, various servants, villagers, officials, and the prisoner himself. There lie sat--strong, neat little Indian with very

black hair, and pliant bands. She viewed him without special emotion. Since they last met, she had elevated him into a principle of evil, but now he seemed to be what he had always been--a slight acquaintance. He was negligible, devoid of significance, dry like a bone, and though he was "guilty" no atmosphere of sin surrounded him. "I suppose he is guilty. Can I possibly have made a mistake?" she thought. For this question still occurred to her intellect, though since Mrs. Moore's departure it had ceased to trouble her conscience. Pleader Mahmoud Ali now arose, and asked with ponderous and ill-judged irony whether his client could be accommodated on the platform too: even Indians felt unwell sometimes, though naturally Major Callendar did not think so, being in charge of a Government Hospital. "Another example of their exquisite sense of humour," sang Miss Derek. Ronny looked at Mr. Das to see how he would handle the difficulty, and Mr. Das became agitated, and snubbed Pleader Mahmoud Ali severely. "Excuse me--" It was the turn of the eminent barrister from Calcutta. He was a fine-looking man, large and bony, with grey closely cropped hair. "We object to the presence of so many European ladies and gentlemen upon the platform," he said in an Oxford voice. "They will have the effect of intimidating our witnesses. Their place is with the rest of the public in the body of the hall. We have no objection to Miss Quested remaining on the platform, since she has been unwell; we shall extend every courtesy to her throughout, despite the scientific truths revealed to us by the District Superintendent of Police; but we do object to the others." "Oh, cut the cackle and let's have the verdict," the Major growled. The distinguished visitor gazed at the Magistrate respectfully. "I agree to that," said Mr. Das, hiding his face desperately in some papers. "It was only to Miss Quested that I gave permission to sit up here. Her friends should be so excessively kind as to climb down." "Well done, Das, quite sound," said Ronny with devastating honesty. "Climb down, indeed, what incredible impertinence!" Mrs. Turton cried. "Do come quietly, Mary," murmured her husband. "Hi! my patient can't be left unattended." "Do you object to the Civil Surgeon remaining, Mr. Amritrao?" "I should object. A platform confers authority." "Even when it's one foot high; so come along all," said the Collector, trying to laugh. "Thank you very much, sir," said Mr. Das, greatly relieved. "Thank you, Mr. Heaslop; thank you, ladies all." And the party, including Miss Quested, descended from its rash eminence. The news of their humiliation spread quickly, and people jeered outside. Their special chairs followed them. Mahmoud Ali (who was quite silly and useless with hatred) objected even to these; by whose authority had special chairs been introduced, why had the Nawab Bahadur not been given one? etc. People began to talk all over the room, about chairs ordinary and special, strips of carpet, platforms one foot high. But the little excursion had a good effect on Miss Quested's nerves. She felt easier now that she had seen all the people who were in the room. It was like knowing the worst. She was sure now that she should come through "all right "--that is to say, without spiritual disgrace, and she passed the good news on to Ronny and Mrs. Turton. They were too much agitated with the defeat to British prestige to be interested. From where she sat, she could see the renegade Mr. Fielding. She had had a better view of him from the platform, and knew that an Indian child perched on his knee. He was watching the proceedings, watching her. When their eyes met, he turned his away, as if direct intercourse was of no interest to him. The Magistrate was also happier. He had won the battle of the platform, and gained confidence. Intelligent and impartial, he continued to listen to the evidence, and tried to forget that later on he should have to pronounce a verdict in accordance with it. The Superintendent trundled steadily forward: he had expected these outbursts of insolence--they are the natural gestures of an inferior race, and he betrayed no hatred of Aziz, merely an abysmal contempt. The speech dealt at length with the "prisoner's dupes," as they were called--Fielding, the servant Antony, the Nawab Bahadur. This aspect of the case had always seemed dubious to Miss Quested, and she had asked the police not to develop it. But they were playing for a heavy sentence, and wanted to prove that the assault was premeditated. And in order to illustrate the strategy, they produced a plan of the Marabar Hills, showing the route that the party had taken, and the "Tank of the Dagger" where they had camped. The Magistrate displayed interest in archaeology. An elevation of a specimen cave was produced; it was lettered "Buddhist Cave." "Not Buddhist, I think, Jain. . . ." "In which cave is the offence alleged, the Buddhist or the Jain?" asked Mahmoud Ali, with the air of unmasking a conspiracy. "All the Marabar caves are Jain." "Yes, sir; then in which Jain cave?" "You will have an opportunity of putting such questions later." Mr. McBryde smiled faintly at their fatuity. Indians invariably collapse over some such point as this. He knew that the defence had some wild hope of establishing an alibi, that they had tried (unsuccessfully) to identify the guide, and that Fielding and Hamidullah had gone out to the Kawa Dol and paced and measured all one moonlit night. "Mr. Lesley says they're Buddhist, and he ought to know if anyone does. But may I call attention to the shape?" And he described what had occurred there. Then he spoke of Miss Derek's arrival, of the scramble down the gully, of the return of the two ladies to Chandrapore, and of the document Miss Quested signed on her arrival, in which mention was made of the field glasses. And then came the culminating evidence: the discovery of the field-glasses on the prisoner. "I have nothing to add at present," he concluded, removing his spectacles. "I will now call my witnesses. The facts will speak for themselves. The prisoner is one of those individuals who have led a double life. I dare say his degeneracy gained upon him gradually. He has been very cunning at concealing, as is usual with the type, and pretending to be a respectable member of society, getting a Government position even. He is now entirely vicious and beyond redemption, I am afraid. He behaved most cruelly, most brutally, to another of his guests, another English lady. In order to get rid of her, and leave him free for his crime, he crushed her into a cave among his servants. However, that is by the way." But his last words brought on another storm, and suddenly a new name, Mrs. Moore, burst on the court like a whirlwind. Mahmoud Ali had

been enraged, his nerves snapped; he shrieked like a maniac, and asked whether his client was charged with murder as well as rape, and who was this second English lady. "I don't propose to call her." "You don't because you can't, you have smuggled her out of the country; she is Mrs. Moore, she would have proved his innocence, she was on our side, she was poor Indians' friend." "You could have called her yourself," cried the Magistrate. "Neither side called her, neither must quote her as evidence." "She was kept from us until too late--I learn too late--this is English justice, here is your British Raj. Give us back Mrs. Moore for five minutes only, and she will save my friend, she will save the name of his sons; don't rule her out, Mr. Das; take back those words as you yourself are a father; tell me where they have put her; oh, Mrs. Moore. . . ." "If the point is of any interest, my mother should have reached Aden," said Ronny dryly; he ought not to have intervened, but the onslaught had startled him. "Imprisoned by you there because she knew the truth." He was almost out of his mind, and could be heard saying above the tumult: "I ruin my career, no matter; we are all to be ruined one by one." "This is no way to defend your case," counselled the Magistrate. "I am not defending a case, nor are you trying one. We are both of us slaves." "Mr. Mahmoud Ali, I have already warned you, and unless you sit down I shall exercise my authority." "Do so; this trial is a farce, I am going." And he handed his papers to Amritrao and left, calling from the door histrionically yet with intense passion, "Aziz, Aziz--farewell for ever." The tumult increased, the invocation of Mrs. Moore continued, and people who did not know what the syllables meant repeated them like a charm. They became Indianized into Esmiss Esmoor, they were taken up in the street outside. In vain the Magistrate threatened and expelled. Until the magic exhausted itself, he was powerless. "Unexpected," remarked Mr. Turton. Ronny furnished the explanation. Before she sailed, his mother had taken to talk about the Marabar in her sleep, especially in the afternoon when servants were on the veranda, and her disjointed remarks on Aziz had doubtless been sold to Mahmoud Ali for a few annas: that kind of thing never ceases in the East. "I thought they'd try something of the sort. Ingenious." He looked into their wide-open mouths. "They get just like that over their religion," he added calmly. "Start and can't stop. I'm sorry for your old Das, he's not getting much of a show." "Mr. Heaslop, how disgraceful dragging in your dear mother," said Miss Derek, bending forward. "It's just a trick, and they happened to pull it off. Now one sees why they had Mahmoud Ali--just to make a scene on the chance. It is his specialty." But he disliked it more than he showed. It was revolting to hear his mother travestied into Esmiss Esmoor, a Hindu goddess.

"Esmiss Esmoor Esmiss Esmoor Esmiss Esmoor Esmiss Esmoor. . . ."

"Ronny--" "Yes, old girl?" "Isn't it all queer." "I'm afraid it's very upsetting for you." "Not the least. I don't mind it." "Well, that's good." She had spoken more naturally and healthily than usual. Bending into the middle of her friends, she said: "Don't worry about me, I'm much better than I was; I don't feel the least faint; I shall be all right, and thank you all, thank you, thank you for your kindness." She had to shout her gratitude, for the chant, Esmiss Esmoor, went on. Suddenly it stopped. It was as if the prayer had been heard, and the relics exhibited. "I apologize for my colleague," said Mr. Amritrao, rather to everyone's surprise. "He is an intimate friend of our client, and his feelings have carried him away." "Mr. Mahmoud Ali will have to apologize in person," the Magistrate said. "Exactly, sir, he must. But we had just learnt that Mrs. Moore had important evidence which she desired to give. She was hurried out of the country by her son before she could give it; and this unhinged Mr. Mahmoud Ali--coming as it does upon an attempt to intimidate our only other European witness, Mr. Fielding. Mr. Mahmoud Ali would have said nothing had not Mrs. Moore been claimed as a witness by the police." He sat down. "An extraneous element is being introduced into the case," said the Magistrate. " I must repeat that as a witness Mrs. Moore does not exist. Neither you, Mr. Amritrao, nor, Mr. McBryde, you, have any right to surmise what that lady would have said. She is not here, and consequently she can say nothing." "Well, I withdraw my reference," said the Superintendent wearily. "I would have done so fifteen minutes ago if I had been given the chance. She is not of the least importance to me." "I have already withdrawn it for the defence." He added with forensic humour: "Perhaps you can persuade the gentlemen outside to withdraw it too," for the refrain in the street continued. "I am afraid my powers do not extend so far," said Das, smiling. So peace was restored, and when Adela came to give her evidence the atmosphere was quieter than it had been since the beginning of the trial. Experts were not surprised. There is no stay in your native. He blazes up over a minor point, and has nothing left for the crisis. What be seeks is a grievance, and this he had found in the supposed abduction of an old lady. He would now be less aggrieved when Aziz was deported. But the crisis was still to come. Adela had always meant to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, and she had rehearsed this as a difficult task--difficult, because her disaster in the cave was connected, though by a thread, with another part of her life, her engagement to Ronny. She had thought of love just before she went in, and had innocently asked Aziz what marriage was like, and she supposed that her question had roused evil in him. To recount this would have been incredibly painful, it was the one point she wanted to keep obscure; she was willing to give details that would have distressed other girls, but this story of her private failure she dared not allude to, and she dreaded being examined in public in case something came out. But as soon as she rose to reply, and heard the sound of her own voice, she feared not even that. A new and unknown sensation protected her, like magnificent armour. She didn't think what had happened or even remember in the ordinary way of memory, but she returned to the Marabar Hills, and spoke from them across a sort of darkness to Mr. McBryde. The fatal day recurred, in every detail, but now she was of it and not of it

at the same time, and this double relation gave it indescribable splendour. Why had she thought the expedition "dull"? Now the sun rose again, the elephant waited, the pale masses of the rock flowed round her and presented the first cave; she entered, and a match was reflected in the polished walls--all beautiful and significant, though she had been blind to it at the time. Questions were asked, and to each she found the exact reply; yes, she had noticed the "Tank of the Dagger," but not known its name; yes, Mrs. Moore had been tired after the first cave and sat in the shadow of a great rock, near the dried-up mud. Smoothly the voice in the distance proceeded, leading along the paths of truth, and the airs from the punkah behind her wafted her on. . . . ". . . the prisoner and the guide took you on to the Kawa Dol, no one else being present?" "The most wonderfully shaped of those hills. Yes." As she spoke, she created the Kawa Dol, saw the niches up the curve of the stone, and felt the heat strike her face. And something caused her to add: "No one else was present to my knowledge. We appeared to be alone." "Very well, there is a ledge half-way up the hill, or broken ground rather, with caves scattered near the beginning of a nullah." "I know where you mean." "You went alone into one of those caves?" "That is quite correct." "And the prisoner followed you." "Now we've got 'im," from the Major. She was silent. The court, the place of question, awaited her reply. But she could not give it until Aziz entered the place of answer. "The prisoner followed you, didn't he?" he repeated in the monotonous tones that they both used; they were employing agreed words throughout, so that this part of the proceedings held no surprises. "May I have half a minute before I reply to that, Mr. McBryde?" "Certainly." Her vision was of several caves. She saw herself in one, and she was also outside it, watching its entrance, for Aziz to pass in. She failed to locate him. It was the doubt that had often visited her, but solid and attractive, like the hills, "I am not--" Speech was more difficult than vision. "I am not quite sure." "I beg your pardon?" said the Superintendent of Police. "I cannot be sure . . ." "I didn't catch that answer." He looked scared, his mouth shut with a snap. "You are on that landing, or whatever we term it, and you have entered a cave. I suggest to you that the prisoner followed you." She shook her head. "What do you mean, please?" "No," she said in a flat, unattractive voice. Slight noises began in various parts of the room, but no one yet understood what was occurring except Fielding. He saw that she was going to have a nervous breakdown and that his friend was saved. "What is that, what are you saying? Speak up, please." The Magistrate bent forward. "I'm afraid I have made a mistake." "What nature of mistake?" "Dr. Aziz never followed me into the cave." The Superintendent slammed down his papers, then picked them up and said calmly: "Now, Miss Quested, let us go on. I will read you the words of the deposition which you signed two hours later in my bungalow." "Excuse me, Mr. McBryde, you cannot go on. I am speaking to the witness myself. And the public will be silent. If it continues to talk, I have the court cleared. Miss Quested, address your remarks to me, who am the Magistrate in charge of the case, and realize their extreme gravity. Remember you speak on oath, Miss Quested." "Dr. Aziz never--" "I stop these proceedings on medical grounds," cried the Major on a word from Turton, and all the English rose from their chairs at once, large white figures behind which the little magistrate was hidden. The Indians rose too, hundreds of things went on at once, so that afterwards each person gave a different account of the catastrophe. "You withdraw the charge? Answer me," shrieked the representative of Justice. Something that she did not understand took hold of the girl and pulled her through. Though the vision was over, and she had returned to the insipidity of the world, she remembered what she had learnt. Atonement and confession--they could wait. It was in hard prosaic tones that she said, "I withdraw everything." "Enough--sit down. Mr. McBryde, do you wish to continue in the face of this?" The Superintendent gazed at his witness as if she was a broken machine, and said, "Are you mad?" "Don't question her, sir; you have no longer the right." "Give me time to consider--" "Sahib, you will have to withdraw; this becomes a scandal," boomed the Nawab Bahadur suddenly from the back of the court. "He shall not," shouted Mrs. Turton against the gathering tumult. "Call the other witnesses; we're none of us safe--" Ronny tried to check her, and she gave him an irritable blow, then screamed insults at Adela. The Superintendent moved to the support of his friends, saying nonchalantly to the Magistrate as he did so, "Right, I withdraw." Mr. Das rose, nearly dead with the strain. He had controlled the case, just controlled it. He had shown that an Indian can preside. To those who could hear him he said, "The prisoner is released without one stain on his character; the question of costs will be decided elsewhere." And then the flimsy framework of the court broke up, the shouts of derision and rage culminated, people screamed and cursed, kissed one another, wept passionately. Here were the English, whom their servants protected, there Aziz fainted in Hamidullah's arms. Victory on this side, defeat on that--complete for one moment was the antithesis. Then life returned to its complexities, person after person struggled out of the room to their various purposes, and before long no one remained on the scene of the fantasy but the beautiful naked god. Unaware that anything unusual had occurred, he continued to pull the cord of his punkah, to gaze at the empty dais and the overturned special chairs, and rhythmically to agitate the clouds of descending dust.

CHAPTER XXV

Miss Quested had renounced her own people. Turning from them, she was drawn into a mass of Indians of the shopkeeping class, and carried by them towards the public exit of the court. The faint, indescribable smell of the bazaars invaded her, sweeter than a London slum, yet more disquieting: a tuft of scented cotton wool, wedged in an old man's ear, fragments of pan between his black teeth, odorous powders, oils--the Scented East of tradition, but blended with human sweat as if a great king had been entangled in ignominy and could not

free himself, or as if the heat of the sun had boiled and fried all the glories of the earth into a single mess. They paid no attention to her. They shook hands over her shoulder, shouted through her body--for when the Indian does ignore his rulers, he becomes genuinely unaware of their existence. Without part in the universe she had created, she was flung against Mr. Fielding. "What do you want here?" Knowing him for her enemy, she passed on into the sunlight without speaking. He called after her, "Where are you going, Miss Quested?" "I don't know." "You can't wander about like that. Where's the car you came in?" "I shall walk." "What madness . . . there's supposed to be a riot on . . . the police have struck, no one knows what'll happen next. Why don't you keep to your own people?" "Ought I to join them?" she said, without emotion. She felt emptied, valueless; there was no more virtue in her. "You can't, it's too late. How are you to get round to the private entrance now? Come this way with me-- quick--I'll put you into my carriage." "Cyril, Cyril, don't leave me," called the shattered voice of Aziz. "I'm coming back. . . . This way, and don't argue." He gripped her arm. "Excuse manners, but I don't know anyone's position. Send my carriage back any time to-morrow, if you please." "But where am I to go in it?" "Where you like. How should I know your arrangements?" The victoria was safe in a quiet side lane, but there were no horses, for the sais, not expecting the trial would end so abruptly, had led them away to visit a friend. She got into it obediently. The man could not leave her, for the confusion increased, and spots of it sounded fanatical. The main road through the bazaars was blocked, and the English were gaining the civil station by by-ways; they were caught like caterpillars, and could have been killed off easily. "What--what have you been doing?" he cried suddenly. "Playing a game, studying life, or what?" "Sir, I intend these for you, sir," interrupted a student, running down the lane with a garland of jasmine on his arm. "I don't want the rubbish; get out." "Sir, I am a horse, we shall be your horses," another cried as he lifted the shafts of the victoria into the air. "Fetch my sais, Rafi; there's a good chap." "No, sir, this is an honour for us." Fielding wearied of his students. The more they lionoured him the less they obeyed. They lassoed him with jasmine and roses, scratched the splash-board against a wall, and recited a poem, the noise of which filled the lane with a crowd. "Hurry up, sir; we pull you in a procession." And, half affectionate, half impudent, they bundled him in. "I don't know whether this suits you, but anyhow you're safe," he remarked. The carriage jerked into the main bazaar, where it created some sensation. Miss Quested was so loathed in Chandrapore that her recantation was discredited, and the rumour ran that she had been stricken by the Deity in the middle of her lies. But they cheered when they saw her sitting by the heroic Principal (some addressed her as Mrs. Moore!), and they garlanded her to match him. Half gods, half guys, with sausages of flowers round their necks, the pair were dragged in the wake of Aziz' victorious landau. In the applause that greeted them some derision mingled. The English always stick together! That was the criticism. Nor was it unjust. Fielding shared it himself, and knew that if some misunderstanding occurred, and an attack was made on the girl by his allies, he would be obliged to die in her defence. He didn't want to die for her, lie wanted to be rejoicing with Aziz. Where was the procession going? To friends, to enemies, to Aziz' bungalow, to the Collector's bungalow, to the Minto Hospital where the Civil Surgeon would eat dust and the patients (confused with prisoners) be released, to Delhi, Simla. The students thought it was going to Government College. When they reached a turning, they twisted the victoria to the right, ran it by side lanes down a hill and through a garden gate into the mango plantation, and, as far as Fielding and Miss Quested were concerned, all was peace and quiet. The trees were full of glossy foliage and slim green fruit, the tank slumbered; and beyond it rose the exquisite blue arches of the garden-house. "Sir, we fetch the others; sir, it is a somewhat heavy load for our arms," were heard. Fielding took the refugee to his office, and tried to telephone to McBryde. But this he could not do; the wires had been cut. All his servants had decamped. Once more he was unable to desert her. He assigned her a couple of rooms, provided her with ice and drinks and biscuits, advised her to lie down, and lay down himself-- there was nothing else to do. He felt restless and thwarted as he listened to the retreating sounds of the procession, and his joy was rather spoilt by bewilderment. It was a victory, but such a queer one. At that moment Aziz was crying, "Cyril, Cyril . . ." Crammed into a carriage with the Nawab Bahadur, Hamidullah, Mahmoud Ali, his own little boys, and a heap of flowers, he was not content; he wanted to be surrounded by all who loved him. Victory gave no pleasure, he had suffered too much. From the moment of his arrest he was done for, he had dropped like a wounded animal; he had despaired, not through cowardice, but because he knew that an Englishwoman's word would always outweigh his own. "It is fate," he said; and, "It is fate," when he was imprisoned anew after Mohurram. All that existed, in that terrible time, was affection, and affection was all that he felt in the first painful moments of his freedom. "Why isn't Cyril following? Let us turn back." But the procession could not turn back. Like a snake in a drain, it advanced down the narrow bazaar towards the basin of the Maidan, where it would turn about itself, and decide on its prey. "Forward, forward," shrieked Mahmoud Ali, whose every utterance had become a yell. "Down with the Collector, down with the Superintendent of Police." "Mr. Mahmoud Ali, this is not wise," implored the Nawab Bahadur: he knew that nothing was gained by attacking the English, who had fallen into their own pit and had better be left there; moreover, he had great possessions and deprecated anarchy. "Cyril, again you desert," cried Aziz. "Yet some orderly demonstration is necessary," said Hamidullah, "otherwise they will still think we are afraid." "Down with the Civil Surgeon . . . rescue Nureddin." "Nureddin?" "They are torturing him." "Oh, my God . . ."--for this, too, was a friend. "They are not. I will not have my grandson made an excuse for an attack on the hospital," the old man protested. "They are. Callendar boasted so before the trial. I heard through the tatties; he said, 'I have tortured that nigger.'" "Oh, my God, my God. . . . He called him a nigger, did he?" "They put pepper

instead of antiseptic on the wounds." "Mr. Mahmoud Ali, impossible; a little roughness will not hurt the boy, he needs discipline." "Pepper. Civil Surgeon said so. They hope to destroy us one by one; they shall fail." The new injury lashed the crowd to fury. It had been aimless hitherto, and had lacked a grievance. When they reached the Maidan and saw the sallow arcades of the Minto they shambled towards it howling. It was near midday. The earth and sky were insanely ugly, the spirit of evil again strode abroad. The Nawab Bahadur alone struggled against it, and told himself that the rumour must be untrue. He had seen his grandson in the ward only last week. But he too was carried forward over the new precipice. To rescue, to maltreat Major Callendar in revenge, and then was to come the turn of the civil station generally. But disaster was averted, and averted by Dr. Panna Lal. Dr. Panna Lal had offered to give witness for the prosecution in the hope of pleasing the English, also because he hated Aziz. When the case broke down, he was in a very painful position. He saw the crash coming sooner than most people, slipped from the court before Mr. Das had finished, and drove Dapple off through the bazaars, in flight from the wrath to come. In the hospital he should be safe, for Major Callendar would protect him. But the Major had not come, and now things were worse than ever, for here was a mob, entirely desirous of his blood, and the orderlies were mutinous and would not help him over the back wall, or rather hoisted him and let him drop back, to the satisfaction of the patients. In agony he cried, "Man can but die the once," and waddled across the compound to meet the invasion, salaaming with one hand and holding up a pale yellow umbrella in the other. "Oh, forgive me," he whined as he approached the victorious landau. "Oh, Dr. Aziz, forgive the wicked lies I told." Aziz was silent, the others thickened their throats and threw up their chins in token of scorn. "I was afraid, I was mislaid," the suppliant continued. "I was mislaid here, there, and everywhere as regards your character. Oh, forgive the poor old hakim who gave you milk when ill! Oh, Nawab Bahadur, whoever merciful, is it my poor little dispensary you require? Take every cursed bottle." Agitated, but alert, he saw them smile at his indifferent English, and suddenly he started playing the buffoon, flung down his umbrella, trod through it, and struck himself upon the nose. He knew what he was doing, and so did they. There was nothing pathetic or eternal in the degradation of such a man. Of ignoble origin, Dr. Panna Lal possessed nothing that could be disgraced, and he wisely decided to make the other Indians feel like kings, because it would put them into better tempers. When he found they wanted Nureddin, he skipped like a goat, he scuttled like a hen to do their bidding, the hospital was saved, and to the end of his life he could not understand why he had not obtained promotion on the morning's work. "Promptness, sir, promptness similar to you," was the argument he employed to Major Callendar when claiming it. When Nureddin emerged, his face all bandaged, there was a roar of relief as though the Bastilhe had fallen. It was the crisis of the march, and the Nawab Bahadur managed to get the situation into hand. Embracing the young man publicly, he began a speech about Justice, Courage, Liberty, and Prudence, ranged under heads, which cooled the passion of the crowd. He further announced that he should give up his British-conferred title, and live as a private gentleman, plain Mr. Zulfiqar, for which reason he was instantly proceeding to his country seat. The landau turned, the crowd accompanied it, the crisis was over. The Marabar caves had been a terrible strain on the local administration; they altered a good many lives and wrecked several careers, but they did not break up a continent or even dislocate a district. "We will have rejoicings to-night," the old man said. "Mr. Hamidullah, I depute you to bring out our friends Fielding and Amritrao, and to discover whether the latter will require special food. The others will keep with me. We shall not go out to Dilkusha until the cool of the evening, of course. I do not know the feelings of other gentlemen; for my own part, I have a slight headache, and I wish I had thought to ask our good Panna Lal for aspirin." For the heat was claiming its own. Unable to madden, it stupefied, and before long most of the Chandrapore combatants were asleep. Those in the civil station kept watch a little, fearing an attack, but presently they too entered the world of dreams--that world in which a third of each man's life is spent, and which is thought by some pessimists to be a premonition of eternity.

CHAPTER XXVI

Evening approached by the time Fielding and Miss Quested met and had the first of their numerous curious conversations. He had hoped, when he woke up, to find someone had fetched her away, but the College remained isolated from the rest of the universe. She asked whether she could have "a sort of interview," and, when he made no reply, said, "Have you any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour?" "None," he said curtly. "Why make such a charge if you were going to withdraw it?" "Why, indeed." "I ought to feel grateful to you, I suppose, but--" "I don't expect gratitude. I only thought you might care to hear what I have to say." "Oh, well," he grumbled, feeling rather schoolboyish, "I don't think a discussion between us is desirable. To put it frankly, I belong to the other side in this ghastly affair." "Would it not interest you to hear my side?" "Not much." "I shouldn't tell you in confidence, of course. So you can hand on all my remarks to your side, for there is one great mercy that has come out of all to-day's misery: I have no longer any secrets. My echo has gone--I call the buzzing sound in my ears an echo. You see, I have been unwell ever since that expedition to the caves, and possibly before it." The remark interested him rather; it was what he had sometimes suspected himself. "What kind of illness?" be enquired. She touched her head at the side, then shook it. "That was my first thought, the day of the arrest: hallucination." "Do you think that would be so?" she asked with great humility. "What should have given me an hallucination?" "One of three things certainly happened in the Marabar," he

said, getting drawn into a discussion against his will. "One of four things. Either Aziz is guilty, which is what your friends think; or you invented the charge out of malice, which is what my friends think; or you have had an hallucination. I'm very much inclined"-- getting up and striding about--"now that you tell me that you felt unwell before the expedition--it's an important piece of evidence--I believe that you yourself broke the strap of the field-glasses; you were alone in that cave the whole time." "Perhaps. . . ." "Can you remember when you first felt out of sorts?" "When I came to tea with you there, in that gardenhouse." "A somewhat unlucky party. Aziz and old Godbole were both ill after it too." "I was not ill--it is far too vague to mention: it is all mixed up with my private affairs. I enjoyed the singing . . . but just about then a sort of sadness began that I couldn't detect at the time . . . no, nothing as solid as sadness: living at half pressure expresses it best. Half pressure. I remember going on to polo with Mr. Heaslop at the Maidan. Various other things happened--it doesn't matter what, but I was tinder par for all of them. I was certainly in that state when I saw the caves, and you suggest (nothing shocks or hurts me)-- you suggest that I had an hallucination there, the sort of thing--though in an awful form--that makes some women think they've had an offer of marriage when none was made." "You put it honestly, anyhow." "I was brought up to be honest; the trouble is it gets me nowhere." Liking her better, he smiled and said, "It'll get us to heaven." " Will it?" "If heaven existed." "Do you not believe in heaven, Mr. Fielding, may I ask?" she said, looking at him shyly. "I do not. Yet I believe that honesty gets us there" "How can that be?" "Let us go back to hallucinations. I was watching you carefully through your evidence this morning, and if I'm right, the hallucination (what you call half pressure--quite as good a word) disappeared suddenly." She tried to remember what she had felt in court, but could not; the vision disappeared whenever she wished to interpret it. "Events presented themselves to me in their logical sequence," was what she said, but it hadn't been that at all. "My belief--and of course I was listening carefully, in hope you would make some slip--my belief is that poor McBryde exorcised you. As soon as he asked you a straightforward question, you gave a straightforward answer, and broke down." "Exorcise in that sense. I thought you meant I'd seen a ghost." "I don't go to that length!" "People whom I respect very much believe in ghosts," she said rather sharply. "My friend Mrs. Moore does." "She's an old lady." "I think you need not be impolite to her, as well as to her son." "I did not intend to be rude. I only meant it is difficult, as we get on in life, to resist the supernatural. I've felt it coming on me myself. I still jog on without it, but what a temptation, at forty-five, to pretend that the dead live again; one's own dead; no one else's matter." "Because the dead don't live again." "I fear not." "So do I." There was a moment's silence, such as often follows the triumph of rationalism. Then he apologized handsomely enough for his behaviour to Heaslop at the club. "What does Dr. Aziz say of me?" she asked, after another pause. "He--he has not been capable of thought in his misery, naturally he's very bitter," said Fielding, a little awkward, because such remarks as Aziz had made were not merely bitter, they were foul. The underlying notion was, "It disgraces me to have been mentioned in connection with such a hag." It enraged him that he had been accused by a woman who had no personal beauty; sexually, he was a snob. This had puzzled and worried Fielding. Sensuality, as long as it is straightforward, did not repel him, but this derived sensuality--the sort that classes a mistress among motor-cars if she is beautiful, and among eye-flies if she isn't--was alien to his own emotions, and he felt a barrier between himself and Aziz whenever it arose. It was, in a new form, the old, old trouble that eats the heart out of every civilization: snobbery, the desire for possessions, creditable appendages; and it is to escape this rather than the lusts of the flesh that saints retreat into the Himalayas. To change the subject, he said, "But let me conclude my analysis. We are agreed that he is not a villain and that you are not one, and we aren't really sure that it was an hallucination. There's a fourth possibility which we must touch on: was it somebody else?" "The guide." "Exactly, the guide. I often think so. Unluckily Aziz hit him on the face, and he got a fright and disappeared. It is most unsatisfactory, and we hadn't the police to help us, the guide was of no interest to them." "Perhaps it was the guide," she said quietly; the question had lost interest for her suddenly. "Or could it have been one of that gang of Pathans who have been drifting through the district?" "Someone who was in another cave, and followed me when the guide was looking away? Possibly." At that moment Hamidullah joined them, and seemed not too pleased to find them closeted together. Like everyone else in Chandrapore, he could make nothing of Miss Quested's conduct. He had overheard their last remark. "Hullo, my dear Fielding," he said. "So I run you down at last. Can you come out at once to Dilkusha?" "At once?" "I hope to leave in a moment, don't let me interrupt," said Adela. "The telephone has been broken; Miss Quested can't ring up her friends," he explained. "A great deal has been broken, more than will ever be mended," said the other. "Still, there should be some way of transporting this lady back to the civil lines. The resources of civilization are numerous." He spoke without looking at Miss Quested, and he ignored the slight movement she made towards him with her hand. Fielding, who thought the meeting might as well be friendly, said, "Miss Quested has been explaining a little about her conduct of this morning." "Perhaps the age of miracles has returned. One must be prepared for everything, our philosophers say." "It must have seemed a miracle to the onlookers," said Adela, addressing him nervously. "The fact is that I realized before it was too late that I had made a mistake, and had just enough presence of mind to say so. That is all my extraordinary conduct amounts to." "All it amounts to, indeed," he retorted, quivering with rage but keeping himself in hand, for he felt she might be setting another trap. "Speaking as a private individual, in a purely informal conversation, I admired your conduct, and I was delighted when our warmhearted students garlanded you. But, like Mr. Fielding, I am surprised; indeed, surprise is too weak a word. I see you drag my best friend into the dirt, damage his health and ruin his prospects in a way you cannot conceive owing to your

ignorance of our society and religion, and then suddenly you get up in the witness-box: 'Oh no, Mr. McBryde, after all I am not quite sure, you may as well let him go.' Am I mad? I keep asking myself. Is it a dream, and if so, when did it start? And without doubt it is a dream that has not yet finished. For I gather you have not done with us yet, and it is now the turn of the poor old guide who conducted you round the caves." "Not at all, we were only discussing possibilities," interposed Fielding. "An interesting pastime, but a lengthy one. There are one hundred and seventy million Indians in this notable peninsula, and of course one or other of them entered the cave. Of course some Indian is the culprit, we must never doubt that. And since, my dear Fielding, these possibilities will take you some time"--here he put his arm over the Englishman's shoulder and swayed him to and fro gently--"don't you think you had better come out to the Nawab Bahadur's--or I should say to Mr. Zulfiqar's, for that is the name he now requires us to call him by." "Gladly, in a minute . . ." "I have just settled my movements," said Miss Quested. "I shall go to the Dak Bungalow." "Not the Turtons'?" said Hamidullah, goggle-eyed. "I thought you were their guest." The Dak Bungalow of Chandrapore was below the average, and certainly servantless. Fielding, though he continued to sway with Hamidullah, was thinking on independent lines, and said in a moment: "I have a better idea than that, Miss Quested. You must stop here at the College. I shall be away at least two days, and you can have the place entirely to yourself, and make your plans at your convenience." "I don't agree at all," said Hamidullah, with every symptom of dismay. "The idea is a thoroughly bad one. There may quite well be another demonstration to-night, and suppose an attack is made on the College. You would be held responsible for this lady's safety, my dear fellow." "They might equally attack the Dak Bungalow." "Exactly, but the responsibility there ceases to be yours." "Quite so. I have given trouble enough." "Do you hear? The lady admits it herself. It's not an attack from our people I fear--you should see their orderly conduct at the hospital; what we must guard against is an attack secretly arranged by the police for the purpose of discrediting you. McBryde keeps plenty of roughs for this purpose, and this would be the very opportunity for him." "Never mind. She is not going to the Dak Bungalow," said Fielding. He had a natural sympathy for the down-trodden--that was partly why he rallied from Aziz--and had become determined not to leave the poor girl in the lurch. Also, he had a new-born respect for her, consequent on their talk. Although her hard schoolmistressy manner remained, she was no longer examining life, but being examined by it; she had become a real person. "Then where is she to go? We shall never have done with her!" For Miss Quested had not appealed to Hamidullah. If she had shown emotion in court, broke down, beat her breast, and invoked the name of God, she would have summoned forth his imagination and generosity--he had plenty of both. But while relieving the Oriental mind, she had chilled it, with the result that he could scarcely believe she was sincere, and indeed from his standpoint she was not. For her behaviour rested on cold justice and honesty; she had felt, while she recanted, no passion of love for those whom she had wronged. Truth is not truth in that exacting land unless there go with it kindness and more kindness and kindness again, unless the Word that was with God also is God. And the girl's sacrifice--so creditable according to Western notions--was rightly rejected, because, though it came from her heart, it did not include her heart. A few garlands from students was all that India ever gave her in return. "But where is she to have her dinner, where is she to sleep? I say here, here, and if she is hit on the head by roughs, she is hit on the head. That is my contribution. Well, Miss Quested?" "You are very kind. I should have said yes, I think, but I agree with Mr. Hamidullah. I must give no more trouble to you. I believe my best plan is to return to the Turtons, and see if they will allow me to sleep, and if they turn me away I must go to the Dak. The Collector would take me in, I know, but Mrs. Turton said this morning that she would never see me again." She spoke without bitterness, or, as Hamidullah thought, without proper pride. Her aim was to cause the minimum of annoyance. "Far better stop here than expose yourself to insults from that preposterous woman." "Do you find her preposterous? I used to. I don't now." "Well, here's our solution," said the barrister, who had terminated his slightly minatory caress and strolled to the window. "Here comes the City Magistrate. He comes in a third-class band-ghari for purposes of disguise, he comes unattended, but here comes the City Magistrate." "At last," said Adela sharply, which caused Fielding to glance at her. "He comes, he comes, he comes. I cringe. I tremble." "Will you ask him what he wants, Mr. Fielding?" "He wants you, of course." "He may not even know I'm here." "I'll see him first, if you prefer." When he had gone, Hamidullah said to her bitingly: "Really, really. Need you have exposed Mr. Fielding to this further discomfort? He is far too considerate." She made no reply, and there was complete silence between them until their host returned. "He has some news for you," he said. "You'll find him on the verandah. He prefers not to come in." "Does he tell me to come out to him?" "Whether he tells you or not, you will go, I think," said Hamidullah. She paused, then said, "Perfectly right," and then said a few words of thanks to the Principal for his kindness to her during the day. "Thank goodness, that's over," he remarked, not escorting her to the verandah, for he held it unnecessary to see Ronny again. "It was insulting of him not to come in." "He couldn't very well after my behaviour to him at the Club. Heaslop doesn't come out badly. Besides, Fate has treated him pretty roughly to-day. He has had a cable to the effect that his mother's dead, poor old soul." "Oh, really. Mrs. Moore. I'm sorry," said Hamidullah rather indifferently. "She died at sea." "The heat, I suppose." "Presumably." "May is no month to allow an old lady to travel in." "Quite so. Heaslop ought never to have let her go, and he knows it. Shall we be off?" "Let us wait until the happy couple leave the compound clear . . . they really are intolerable dawdling there. Ah well, Fielding, you don't believe in Providence, I remember. I do. This is Heaslop's punishment for abducting our witness in order to stop us establishing our alibi." "You go rather too far there. The poor old lady's evidence could have had no value,

shout and shriek Mahmoud Ali as he will. She couldn't see though the Kawa Dol even if she had wanted to. Only Miss Quested could have saved him." "She loved Aziz, he says, also India, and he loved her." "Love is of no value in a witness, as a barrister ought to know. But I see there is about to be an Esmiss Esmoor legend at Chandrapore, my dear Hamiduilah, and I will not impede its growth." The other smiled, and looked at his watch. They both regretted the death, but they were middle-aged men, who had invested their emotions elsewhere, and outbursts of grief could not be expected from them over a slight acquaintance. It's only one's own dead who matter. If for a moment the sense of communion in sorrow came to them, it passed. How indeed is it possible for one human being to be sorry for all the sadness that meets him on the face of the earth, for the pain that is endured not only by men, but by animals and plants, and perhaps by the stones? The soul is tired in a moment, and in fear of losing the little she does understand, she retreats to the permanent lines which habit or chance have dictated, and suffers there. Fielding had met the dead woman only two or three times, Hamidullah had seen her in the distance once, and they were far more occupied with the coming gathering at Dilkusha, the "victory" dinner, for which they would be most victoriously late. They agreed not to tell Aziz about Mrs. Moore till the morrow, because he was fond of her, and the bad news might spoil his fun. "Oh, this is unbearable!" muttered Hamidullah. For Miss Quested was back again. "Mr. Fielding, has Ronny told you of this new misfortune?" He bowed. "Ah me!" She sat down, and seemed to stiffen into a monument. "Heaslop is waiting for you, I think." "I do so long to be alone. She was my best friend, far more to me than to him. I can't bear to be with Ronny . . . I can't explain . . . Could you do me the very great kindness of letting me stop after all?" Hamidullah swore violently in the vernacular. "I should be pleased, but does Mr. Heaslop wish it?" "I didn't ask him, we are too much upset--it's so complex, not like what unhappiness is supposed to be. Each of us ought to be alone, and think. Do come and see Ronny again." "I think he should come in this time," said Fielding, feeling that this much was due to his own dignity. "Do ask him to come." She returned with him. He was half miserable, half arrogant--indeed, a strange mix-up--and broke at once into uneven speech. "I came to bring Miss Quested away, but her visit to the Turtons has ended, and there is no other arrangements so far, mine are bachelor quarters now--" Fielding stopped him courteously. "Say no more, Miss Quested stops here. I only wanted to be assured of your approval. Miss Quested, you had better send for your own servant if he can be found, but I will leave orders with mine to do all they can for you, also I'll let the Scouts know. They have guarded the College ever since it was closed, and may as well go on. I really think you'll be as safe here as anywhere. I shall be back Thursday." Meanwhile Hamidullah, determined to spare the enemy no incidental pain, had said to Ronny: "We hear, sir, that your mother has died. May we ask where the cable came from?" "Aden." "Ah, you were boasting she had reached Aden, in court." "But she died on leaving Bombay," broke in Adela. "She was dead when they called her name this morning. She must have been buried at sea." Somehow this stopped Hamidullah, and he desisted from his brutality, which had shocked Fielding more than anyone else. He remained silent while the details of Miss Qnested's occupation of the College were arranged, merely remarking to Ronny, "It is clearly to be understood, sir, that neither Mr. Fielding nor any of us are responsible for this lady's safety at Government College," to which Ronny agreed. After that, he watched the semichivalrous behavings of the three English with quiet amusement; he thought Fielding had been incredibly silly and weak, and he was amazed by the younger people's want of proper pride. When they were driving out to Dilkusha, hours late, he said to Amritrao, who accompanied them: "Mr. Amritrao, have you considered what sum Miss Quested ought to pay as compensation?" "Twenty thousand rupees." No more was then said, but the remark horrified Fielding. He couldn't bear to think of the queer honest girl losing her money and possibly her young man too. She advanced into his consciousness suddenly. And, fatigued by the merciless and enormous day, he lost his usual sane view of human intercourse, and felt that we exist not in ourselves, but in terms of each others' minds--a notion for which logic offers no support and which had attacked him only once before, the evening after the catastrophe, when from the verandah of the club he saw the fists and fingers of the Marabar swell until they included the whole night sky.

CHAPTER XXVII

"Aziz, are you awake?" "No, so let us have a talk; let us dream plans for the future." "I am useless at dreaming." "Good night then, dear fellow." The Victory Banquet was over, and the revellers lay on the roof of plain Mr. Zulfiqar's mansion, asleep, or gazing through mosquito nets at the stars. Exactly above their heads hung the constellation of the Lion, the disc of Regulus so large and bright that it resembled a tunnel, and when this fancy was accepted all the other stars seemed tunnels too. "Are you content with our day's work, Cyril?" the voice on his left continued. "Are you?" "Except that I ate too much. 'How is stomach, how head?'--I say, Fauna Lal and Callendar'll get the sack." "There'll be a general move at Chandrapore." "And you'll get promotion." "They can't well move me down, whatever their feelings." "In any case we spend our holidays together, and visit Kashmir, possibly Persia, for I shall have plenty of money. Paid to me on account of the injury sustained by my character," he explained with cynical calm. "While with me you shall never spend a single pie. This is what I have always wished, and as the result of my misfortunes it has come." "You have won a great victory . . ." began Fielding. "I know, my dear chap, I know; your voice need not become so solemn and anxious. I know what you are going to say next: Let, oh let Miss Quested off paying, so that the English may say, 'Here is a native who has actually behaved like a gentleman; if it was not for his black face we would almost allow him

to join our club.' The approval of your compatriots no longer interests me, I have become anti-British, and ought to have done so sooner, it would have saved me numerous misfortunes." "Including knowing me." "I say, shall we go and pour water on to Mohammed Latif's face? He is so funny when this is done to him asleep." The remark was not a question but a full-stop. Fielding accepted it as such and there was a pause, pleasantly filled by a little wind which managed to brush the top of the house. The banquet, though riotous, had been agreeable, and now the blessings of leisure--unknown to the West, which either works or idles--descended on the motley company. Civilization strays about like a ghost here, revisiting the ruins of empire, and is to be found not in great works of art or mighty deeds, but in the gestures well-bred Indians make when they sit or lie down. Fielding, who had dressed up in native costume, learnt from his excessive awkwardness in it that all his motions were makeshifts, whereas when the Nawab Bahadur stretched out his hand for food or Nureddin applauded a song, something beautiful had been accomplished which needed no development. This restfulness of gesture--it is the Peace that passeth Understanding, after all, it is the social equivalent of Yoga. When the whirring of action ceases, it becomes visible, and reveals a civilization which the West can disturb but will never acquire. The hand stretches out for ever, the lifted knee has the eternity though not the sadness of the grave. Aziz was full of civilization this evening, complete, dignified, rather hard, and it was with diffidence that the other said: "Yes, certainly you must let off Miss Quested easily. She must pay all your costs, that is only fair, but do not treat her like a conquered enemy." "Is she wealthy! I depute you to find out." "The sums mentioned at dinner when you all got so excited--they would ruin her, they are perfectly preposterous. Look here . . ." "I am looking, though it gets a bit dark. I see Cyril Fielding to be a very nice chap indeed and my best friend, but in some ways a fool. You think that by letting Miss Quested off easily I shall make a better reputation for myself and Indians generally. No, no. It will be put down to weakness and the attempt to gain promotion officially. I have decided to have nothing more to do with British India, as a matter of fact. I shall seek service in some Moslem State, such as Hyderabad, Bhopal, where Englishmen cannot insult me any more. Don't counsel me otherwise." "In the course of a long talk with Miss Quested . . ." "I don't want to hear your long talks." "Be quiet. In the course of a long talk with Miss Quested I have begun to understand her character. It's not an easy one, she being a prig. But she is perfectly genuine and very brave. When she saw she was wrong, she pulled herself up with a jerk and said so. I want you to realize what that means. All her friends around her, the entire British Raj pushing her forward. She stops, sends the whole thing to smithereens. In her place I should have funked it. But she stopped, and almost did she become a national heroine, but my students ran us down a side street before the crowd caught flame. Do treat her considerately. She really mustn't get the worst of both worlds. I know what all these "--he indicated the shrouded forms on the roof--" will want, but you mustn't listen to them. Be merciful. Act like one of your six Mogul Emperors, or all the six rolled into one." "Not even Mogul Emperors showed mercy until they received an apology." "She'll apologize if that's the trouble," he cried, sitting up. "Look, I'll make you an offer. Dictate to me whatever form of words you like, and this time to-morrow I'll bring it back signed. This is not instead of any public apology she may make you in law. It's an addition." "'Dear Dr. Aziz, I wish you had come into the cave; I am an awful old hag, and it is my last chance.' Will she sign that?" "Well good night, good night, it's time to go to sleep, after that." "Good night, I suppose it is." "Oh, I wish you wouldn't make that kind of remark," he continued after a pause. "It is the one thing in you I can't put up with." "I put up with all things in you, so what is to be done?" "Well, you hurt me by saying it; good night." There was silence, then dreamily but with deep feeling the voice said: "Cyril, I have had an idea which will satisfy your tender mind: I shall consult Mrs. Moore." Opening his eyes, and beholding thousands of stars, he could not reply, they silenced him. "Her opinion will solve everything; I can trust her so absolutely. If she advises me to pardon this girl, I shall do so. She will counsel me nothing against my real and true honour, as you might." "Let us discuss that to-morrow morning." "Is it not strange? I keep on forgetting she has left India. During the shouting of her name in court I fancied she was present. I had shut my eyes, I confused myself on purpose to deaden the pain. Now this very instant I forgot again. I shall be obliged to write. She is now far away, well on her way towards Ralph and Stella." "To whom?" "To those other children." "I have not heard of other children." "Just as I have two boys and a girl, so has Mrs. Moore. She told me in the mosque." "I knew her so slightly." "I have seen her but three times, but I know she is an Oriental." "You are so fantastic. . . . Miss Quested, you won't treat her generously; while over Mrs. Moore there is this elaborate chivalry. Miss Quested anyhow behaved decently this morning, whereas the old lady never did anything for you at all, and it's pure conjecture that she would have come forward in your favour, it only rests on servants' gossip. Your emotions never seem in proportion to their objects, Aziz." "Is emotion a sack of potatoes, so much the pound, to be measured out? Am I a machine? I shall be told I can use up my emotions by using them, next." "I should have thought you would. It sounds common sense. You can't eat your cake and have it, even in the world of the spirit." "If you are right, there is no point in any friendship; it all comes down to give and take, or give and return, which is disgusting, and we had better all leap over this parapet and kill ourselves. Is anything wrong with you this evening that you grow so materialistic?" "Your unfairness is worse than my materialism." "I see. Anything further to complain of?" He was good-tempered and affectionate but a little formidable. Imprisonment had made channels for his character, which would never fluctuate as widely now as in the past. "Because it is far better you put all your difficulties before me, if we are to be friends for ever. You do not like Mrs. Moore, and are annoyed because I do; however, you will like her in time." When a person, really dead, is supposed to be alive, an unhealthiness infects the conversation. Fielding could not stand the

tension any longer and blurted out: "I'm sorry to say Mrs. Moore's dead." But Hamidullah, who had been listening to all their talk, and did not want the festive evening spoilt, cried from the adjoining bed: "Aziz, he is trying to pull your leg; don't believe him, the villain." "I do not believe him," said Aziz; he was inured to practical jokes, even of this type. Fielding said no more. Facts are facts, and everyone would learn of Mrs. Moore's death in the morning. But it struck him that people are not really dead until they are felt to be dead. As long as there is some misunderstanding about them, they possess a sort of immortality. An experience of his own confirmed this. Many years ago he had lost a great friend, a woman, who believed in the Christian heaven and assured him that after the changes and chances of this mortal life they would meet in it again. Fielding was a blank, frank atheist, but he respected every opinion his friend held: to do this is essential in friendship. And it seemed to him for a time that the dead awaited him, and when the illusion faded it left behind it an emptiness that was almost guilt: "This really is the end," he thought, "and I gave her the final blow." He had tried to kill Mrs. Moore this evening, on the roof of the Nawab Bahadur's house; but she still eluded him, and the atmosphere remained tranquil. Presently the moon rose--the exhausted crescent that precedes the sun--and shortly after men and oxen began their interminable labour, and the gracious interlude, which he had tried to curtail, came to its natural conclusion.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Dead she was--committed to the deep while still on the southward track, for the boats from Bombay cannot point towards Europe until Arabia has been rounded; she was further in the tropics than ever achieved while on shore, when the sun touched her for the last time and her body was lowered into yet another India--the Indian Ocean. She left behind her sore discomfort, for a death gives a ship a bad name. Who was this Mrs. Moore? When Aden was reached, Lady Mellanby cabled, wrote, did all that was kind, but the wife of a Lieutenant-Governor does not bargain for such an experience; and she repeated: "I had only seen the poor creature for a few hours when she was taken ill; really this has been needlessly distressing, it spoils one's home-coming." A ghost followed the ship up the Red Sea, but failed to enter the Mediterranean. Somewhere about Suez there is always a social change: the arrangements of Asia weaken and those of Europe begin to be felt, and during the transition Mrs. Moore was shaken off. At Port Said the grey blustery north began. The weather was so cold and bracing that the passengers felt it must have broken in the land they had left, but it became hotter steadily there in accordance with its usual law. The death took subtler and more lasting shapes in Chandrapore. A legend sprang up that an Englishman had killed his mother for trying to save an Indian's life-- and there was just enough truth in this to cause annoyance to the authorities. Sometimes it was a cow that had been killed--or a crocodile with the tusks of a boar had crawled out of the Ganges. Nonsense of this type is more difficult to combat than a solid lie. It hides in rubbish heaps and moves when no one is looking. At one period two distinct tombs containing Esmiss Esmoor's remains were reported: one by the tannery, the other up near the goods station. Mr. McBryde visited them both and saw signs of the beginning of a cult--earthenware saucers and so on. Being an experienced official, he did nothing to irritate it, and after a week or so, the rash died down. "There's propaganda behind all this," he said, forgetting that a hundred years ago, when Europeans still made their home in the country-side and appealed to its imagination, they occasionally became local demons after death-- not a whole god, perhaps, but part of one, adding an epithet or gesture to what already existed, just as the gods contribute to the great gods, and they to the philosophic Brahm. Ronny reminded himself that his mother had left India at her own wish, but his conscience was not clear. He had behaved badly to her, and he had either to repent (which involved a mental overturn), or to persist in unkindness towards her. He chose the latter course. How tiresome she had been with her patronage of Aziz! What a bad influence upon Adela! And now she still gave trouble with ridiculous "tombs," mixing herself up with natives. She could not help it, of course, but she had attempted similar exasperating expeditions in her lifetime, and he reckoned it against her. The young man had much to worry him--the heat, the local tension, the approaching visit of the Lieutenant-Governor, the problems of Adela--and threading them all together into a grotesque garland were these Indianizations of Mrs. Moore. What does happen to one's mother when she dies? Presumably she goes to heaven, anyhow she clears out. Ronny's religion was of the sterilized Public School brand, which never goes bad, even in the tropics. Wherever he entered, mosque, cave, or temple, he retained the spiritual outlook of the Fifth Form, and condemned as "weakening" any attempt to understand them. Pulling himself together, he dismissed the matter from his mind. In due time he and his half-brother and sister would put up a tablet to her in the Northamptonshire church where she had worshipped, recording the dates of her birth and death and the fact that she had been buried at sea. This would be sufficient. And Adela--she would have to depart too; he hoped she would have made the suggestion herself ere now. He really could not marry her--it would mean the end of his career. Poor lamentable Adela. . . . She remained at Government College, by Fielding's courtesy--unsuitable and humiliating, but no one would receive her at the civil station. He postponed all private talk until the award against her was decided. Aziz was suing her for damages in the sub-judge's court. Then he would ask her to release him. She had killed his love, and it had never been very robust; they would never have achieved betrothal but for the accident to the Nawab Bahadur's car. She belonged to the callow academic period of his life which he had outgrown--Grasmere, serious talks and walks, that sort of thing.

CHAPTER XXIX

The visit of the Lieutenant-Governor of the Province formed the next stage in the decomposition of the Marabar. Sir Gilbert, though not an enlightened man, held enlightened opinions. Exempted by a long career in the Secretariate from personal contact with the peoples of India, he was able to speak of them urbanely, and to deplore racial prejudice. He applauded the outcome of the trial, and congratulated Fielding on having taken "the broad, the sensible, the only possible charitable view from the first. Speaking confidentially . . ." he proceeded. Fielding deprecated confidences, but Sir Gilbert insisted on imparting them; the affair had been "mishandled by certain of our friends up the hill" who did not realize that "the hands of the clock move forward, not back," etc., etc. One thing he could guarantee: the Principal would receive a most cordial invitation to rejoin the club, and he begged, nay commanded him, to accept. He returned to his Himalayan altitudes well satisfied; the amount of money Miss Quested would have to pay, the precise nature of what had happened in the caves--these were local details, and did not concern him. Fielding found himself drawn more and more into Miss Quested's affairs. The College remained closed and he ate and slept at Hamidullah's, so there was no reason she should not stop on if she wished. In her place he would have cleared out, sooner than submit to Ronny's half-hearted and distracted civilities, but she was waiting for the hour-glass of her sojourn to run through. A house to live in, a garden to walk in during the brief moment of the cool--that was all she asked, and he was able to provide them. Disaster had shown her her limitations, and he realized now what a fine loyal character she was. Her humility was touching. She never repined at getting the worst of both worlds; she regarded it as the due punishment of her stupidity. When he hinted to her that a personal apology to Aziz might be seemly, she said sadly: "Of course. I ought to have thought of it myself, my instincts never help me. Why didn't I rush up to him after the trial? Yes, of course I will write him an apology, but please will you dictate it?" Between them they concocted a letter, sincere, and full of moving phrases, but it was not moving as a letter. "Shall I write another?" she enquired. "Nothing matters if I can undo the harm I have caused. I can do this right, and that right; but when the two are put together they come wrong. That's the defect of my character. I have never realized it until now. I thought that if I was just and asked questions I would come through every difficulty." He replied: "Our letter is a failure for a simple reason which we had better face: you have no real affection for Aziz, or Indians generally." She assented. "The first time I saw you, you were wanting to see India, not Indians, and it occurred to me: Ah, that won't take us far. Indians know whether they are liked or not--they cannot be fooled here. Justice never satisfies them, and that is why the British Empire rests on sand." Then she said: "Do I like anyone, though?" Presumably she liked Heaslop, and he changed the subject, for this side of her life did not concern him. His Indian friends were, on the other hand, a bit above themselves. Victory, which would have made the English sanctimonious, made them aggressive. They wanted to develop an offensive, and tried to do so by discovering new grievances and wrongs, many of which had no existence. They suffered from the usual disillusion that attends warfare. The aims of battle and the fruits of conquest are never the same; the latter have their value and only the saint rejects them, but their hint of immortality vanishes as soon as they are held in the hand. Although Sir Gilbert had been courteous, almost obsequious, the fabric he represented had in no wise bowed its head. British officialism remained, as allpervading and as unpleasant as the sun; and what was next to be done against it was not very obvious, even to Mahmoud Ali. Loud talk and trivial lawlessness were attempted, and behind them continued a genuine but vague desire for education. "Mr. Fielding, we must all be educated promptly." Aziz was friendly and domineering. He wanted Fielding to "give in to the East," as he called it, and live in a condition of affectionate dependence upon it. "You can trust me, Cyril." No question of that, and Fielding had no roots among his own people. Yet he really couldn't become a sort of Mohammed Latif. When they argued about it something racial intruded--not bitterly, but inevitably, like the colour of their skins: coffee-colour versus pinko-grey. And Aziz would conclude: "Can't you see that I'm grateful to you for your help and want to reward you?" And the other would retort: "If you want to reward me, let Miss Quested off paying." The insensitiveness about Adela displeased him. It would, from every point of view, be right to treat her generously, and one day he had the notion of appealing to the memory of Mrs. Moore. Aziz had this high and fantastic estimate of Mrs. Moore. Her death had been a real grief to his warm heart; he wept like a child and ordered his three children to weep also. There was no doubt that he respected and loved her. Fielding's first attempt was a failure. The reply was: "I see your trick. I want revenge on them. Why should I be insulted and suffer the contents of my pockets read and my wife's photograph taken to the police station? Also I want the money--to educate my little boys, as I explained to her." But he began to weaken, and Fielding was not ashamed to practise a little necromancy. Whenever the question of compensation came up, he introduced the dead woman's name. Just as other propagandists invented her a tomb, so did he raise a questionable image of her in the heart of Aziz, saying nothing that he believed to be untrue, but producing something that was probably far from the truth. Aziz yielded suddenly. He felt it was Mrs. Moore's wish that he should spare the woman who was about to marry her son, that it was the only honour he could pay her, and he renounced with a passionate and beautiful outburst the whole of the compensation money, claiming only costs. It was fine of him, and, as he foresaw, it won him no credit with the English. They still believed he was guilty, they believed it to the end of their careers, and retired Anglo-Indians in Tunbridge Wells or Cheltenham still murmur to each other: "That Marabar case which broke down because the poor girl couldn't face giving her evidence--

that was another bad case." When the affair was thus officially ended, Ronny, who was about to be transferred to another part of the Province, approached Fielding with his usual constraint and said: "I wish to thank you for the help you have given Miss Quested. She will not of course trespass on your hospitality further; she has as a matter of fact decided to return to England. I have just arranged about her passage for her. I understand she would like to see you." "I shall go round at once." On reaching the College, he found her in some upset. He learnt that the engagement had been broken by Ronny. "Far wiser of him," she said pathetically. "I ought to have spoken myself, but I drifted on wondering what would happen. I would willingly have gone on spoiling his life through inertia--one has nothing to do, one belongs nowhere and becomes a public nuisance without realizing it." In order to reassure him, she added: "I speak only of India. I am not astray in England. I fit in there--no, don't think I shall do harm in England. When I am forced back there, I shall settle down to some career. I have sufficient money left to start myself, and heaps of friends of my own type. I shall be quite all right." Then sighing: "But oh, the trouble I've brought on everyone here. . . . I can never get over it. My carefulness as to whether we should marry or not, and in the end Ronny and I part and aren't even sorry. We ought never to have thought of marriage. Weren't you amazed when our engagement was originally announced?" "Not much. At my age one's seldom amazed," he said, smiling. "Marriage is too absurd in any case. It begins and continues for such very slight reasons. The social business props it up on one side, and the theological business on the other, but neither of them are marriage, are they? I've friends who can't remember why they married, no more can their wives. I suspect that it mostly happens haphazard, though afterwards various noble reasons are invented. About marriage I am cynical." "I am not. This false start has been all my own fault. I was bringing to Ronny nothing that ought to be brought, that was why he rejected me really. I entered that cave thinking: Am I fond of him? I have not yet told you that, Mr. Fielding. I didn't feel justified. Tenderness, respect, personal intercourse--I tried to make them take the place--of--" "I no longer want love," he said, supplying the word. "No more do I. My experiences here have cured me. But I want others to want it." "But to go back to our first talk (for I suppose this is our last one)--when you entered that cave, who did follow you, or did no one follow you? Can you now say? I don't like it left in air." "Let us call it the guide," she said indifferently. "It will never be known. It's as if I ran my finger along that polished wall in the dark, and cannot get further. I am up against something, and so are you. Mrs. Moore--she did know." "How could she have known what we don't?" "Telepathy, possibly." The pert, meagre word fell to the ground. Telepathy? What an explanation! Better withdraw it, and Adela did so. She was at the end of her spiritual tether, and so was he. Were there worlds beyond which they could never touch, or did all that is possible enter their consciousness? They could not tell. They only realized that their outlook was more or less similar, and found in this a satisfaction. Perhaps life is a mystery, not a muddle; they could not tell. Perhaps the hundred Indias which fuss and squabble so tiresomely are one, and the universe they mirror is one. They had not the apparatus for judging. "Write to me when you get to England." "I shall, often. You have been excessively kind. Now that I'm going, I realize it. I wish I could do something for you in return, but I see you've all you want." "I think so," he replied after a pause. "I have never felt more happy and secure out here. I really do get on with Indians, and they do trust me. It's pleasant that I haven't had to resign my job. It's pleasant to be praised by an L.G. Until the next earthquake I remain as I am." "Of course this death has been troubling me." "Aziz was so fond of her too." "But it has made me remember that we must all die: all these personal relations we try to live by are temporary. I used to feel death selected people, it is a notion one gets from novels, because some of the characters are usually left talking at the end. Now 'death spares no one' begins to be real." "Don't let it become too real, or you'll die yourself. That is the objection to meditating upon death. We are subdued to what we work in. I have felt the same temptation, and had to sheer off. I want to go on living a bit." "So do I." A friendliness, as of dwarfs shaking hands, was in the air. Both man and woman were at the height of their powers--sensible, honest, even subtle. They spoke the same language, and held the same opinions, and the variety of age and sex did not divide them. Yet they were dissatisfied. When they agreed, "I want to go on living a bit," or, " I don't believe in God," the words were followed by a curious backwash as though the universe had displaced itself to fill up a tiny void, or as though they had seen their own gestures from an immense height--dwarfs talking, shaking hands and assuring each other that they stood on the same footing of insight. They did not think they were wrong, because as soon as honest people think they are wrong instability sets up. Not for them was an infinite goal behind the stars, and they never sought it. But wistfulness descended on them now, as on other occasions; the shadow of the shadow of a dream fell over their clear-cut interests, and objects never seen again seemed messages from another world. "And I do like you so very much, if I may say so," he affirmed. "I'm glad, for I like you. Let's meet again." "We will, in England, if I ever take home leave." "But I suppose you're not likely to do that yet." "Quite a chance. I have a scheme on now as a matter of fact." "Oh, that would be very nice." So it petered out. Ten days later Adela went off, by the same route as her dead friend. The final beat up before the monsoon had come. The country was stricken and blurred. Its houses, trees and fields were all modelled out of the same brown paste, and the sea at Bombay slid about like broth against the quays. Her last Indian adventure was with Antony, who followed her on to the boat and tried to blackmail her. She had been Mr. Fielding's mistress, Antony said. Perhaps Antony was discontented with his tip. She rang the cabin bell and had him turned out, but his statement created rather a scandal, and people did not speak to her much during the first part of the voyage. Through the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea she was left to herself, and to the dregs of Chandrapore. With Egypt the atmosphere altered.

The clean sands, heaped on each side of the canal, seemed to wipe off everything that was difficult and equivocal, and even Port Said looked pure and charming in the light of a rose-grey morning. She went on shore there with an American missionary, they walked out to the Lesseps statue, they drank the tonic air of the Levant. "To what duties, Miss Quested, are you returning in your own country after your taste of the tropics?" the missionary asked. "Observe, I don't say to what do you turn, but to what do you return. Every life ought to contain both a turn and a return. This celebrated pioneer (he pointed to the statue) will make my question clear. He turns to the East, he returns to the West. You can see it from the cute position of his hands, one of which holds a string of sausages." The missionary looked at her humorously, in order to cover the emptiness of his mind. He had no idea what he meant by "turn" and "return," but he often used words in pairs, for the sake of moral brightness. "I see," she replied. Suddenly, in the Mediterranean clarity, she had seen. Her first duty on returning to England was to look up those other children of Mrs. Moore's, Ralph and Stella, then she would turn to her profession. Mrs. Moore had tended to keep the products of her two marriages apart, and Adela had not come across the younger branch so far.

CHAPTER XXX

Another local consequence of the trial was a Hindu-Moslem entente. Loud protestations of amity were exchanged by prominent citizens, and there went with them a genuine desire for a good understanding. Aziz, when he was at the hospital one day, received a visit from rather a sympathetic figure: Mr. Das. The magistrate sought two favours from him: a remedy for shingles and a poem for his brother-in-law's new monthly magazine. He accorded both. "My dear Das, why, when you tried to send me to prison, should I try to send Mr. Bhattacharya a poem? Eh? That is naturally entirely a joke. I will write him the best I can, but I thought your magazine was for Hindus." "It is not for Hindus, but Indians generally," he said timidly. "There is no such person in existence as the general Indian." "There was not, but there may be when you have written a poem. You are our hero; the whole city is behind you, irrespective of creed." "I know, but will it last?" "I fear not," said Das, who had much mental clearness. "And for that reason, if I may say so, do not introduce too many Persian expressions into the poem, and not too much about the bulbul." "Half a sec," said Aziz, biting his pencil. He was writing out a prescription. "Here you are. . . . Is not this better than a poem?" "Happy the man who can compose both." "You are full of compliments to-day." "I know you bear me a grudge for trying that case," said the other, stretching out his hand impulsively. "You are so kind and friendly, but always I detect irony beneath your manner." "No, no, what nonsense!" protested Aziz. They shook hands, in a half-embrace that typified the entente. Between people of distant climes there is always the possibility of romance, but the various branches of Indians know too much about each other to surmount the unknowable easily. The approach is prosaic. "Excellent," said Aziz, patting a stout shoulder and thinking, "I wish they did not remind me of cow-dung"; Das thought, "Some Moslems are very violent." They smiled wistfully, each spying the thought in the other's heart, and Das, the more articulate, said: "Excuse my mistakes, realize my limitations. Life is not easy as we know it on the earth." "Oh, well, about this poem--how did you hear I sometimes scribbled?" he asked, much pleased, and a good deal moved--for literature had always been a solace to him, something that the ugliness of facts could not spoil. "Professor Godbole often mentioned it, before his departure for Mau." "How did he hear?" "He too was a poet; do you not divine each other?" Flattered by the invitation, he got to work that evening. The feel of the pen between his fingers generated bulbuls at once. His poem was again about the decay of Islam and the brevity of love; as sad and sweet as he could contrive, but not nourished by personal experience, and of no interest to these excellent Hindus. Feeling dissatisfied, he rushed to the other extreme, and wrote a satire, which was too libellous to print. He could only express pathos or venom, though most of his life had no concern with either. He loved poetry--science was merely an acquisition, which he laid aside when unobserved like his European dress--and this evening he longed to compose a new song which should be acclaimed by multitudes and even sung in the fields. In what language shall it be written? And what shall it announce? He vowed to see more of Indians who were not Mohammedans, and never to look backward. It is the only healthy course. Of what help, in this latitude and hour, are the glories of Cordova and Samarcand? They have gone, and while we lament them the English occupy Delhi and exclude us from East Africa. Islam itself, though true, throws cross-lights over the path to freedom. The song of the future must transcend creed. The poem for Mr. Bhattacharya never got written, but it had an effect. It led him towards the vague and bulky figure of a mother-land. He was without natural affection for the land of his birth, but the Marabar Hills drove him to it. Half closing his eyes, he attempted to love India. She must imitate Japan. Not until she is a nation will her sons be treated with respect. He grew harder and less approachable. The English, whom he had laughed at or ignored, persecuted him everywhere; they had even thrown nets over his dreams. "My great mistake has been taking our rulers as a joke," he said to Hamidullah next day; who replied with a sigh: "It is far the wisest way to take them, but not possible in the long run. Sooner or later a disaster such as yours occurs, and reveals their secret thoughts about our character. If God himself descended from heaven into their club and said you were innocent, they would disbelieve him. Now you see why Mahmoud Ali and self waste so much time over intrigues and associate with creatures like Ram Chand." "I cannot endure committees. I shall go right away." "Where to? Turtons and Burtons, all are the same." "But not in an Indian state." "I believe the Politicals are obliged to have better manners. It amounts to

no more." "I do want to get away from British India, even to a poor job. I think I could write poetry there. I wish I had lived in Babur's time and fought and written for him. Gone, gone, and not even any use to say 'Gone, gone,' for it weakens us while we say it. We need a king, Hamidullah; it would make our lives easier. As it is, we must try to appreciate these quaint Hindus. My notion now is to try for some post as doctor in one of their states." "Oh, that is going much too far." "It is not going as far as Mr. Ram Chand." "But the money, the money--they will never pay an adequate salary, those savage Rajas." "I shall never be rich anywhere, it is outside my character." "If you had been sensible and made Miss Quested pay--" "I chose not to. Discussion of the past is useless," he said, with sudden sharpness of tone. "I have allowed her to keep her fortune and buy herself a husband in England, for which it will be very necessary. Don't mention the matter again." "Very well, but your life must continue a poor man's; no holidays in Kashmir for you yet, you must stick to your profession and rise to a highly paid post, not retire to a jungle-state and write poems. Educate your children, read the latest scientific periodicals, compel European doctors to respect you. Accept the consequences of your own actions like a man." Aziz winked at him slowly and said: "We are not in the law courts. There are many ways of being a man; mine is to express what is deepest in my heart." "To such a remark there is certainly no reply," said Hamidullah, moved. Recovering himself and smiling, he said: "Have you heard this naughty rumour that Mohammed Latif has got hold of?" "Which?" "When Miss Quested stopped in the College, Fielding used to visit her . . . rather too late in the evening, the servants say." "A pleasant change for her if he did," said Aziz, making a curious face. "But you understand my meaning!" The young man winked again and said: "Just! Still, your meaning doesn't help me out of my difficulties. I am determined to leave Chandrapore. The problem is, for where? I am determined to write poetry. The problem is, about what? You give me no assistance." Then, surprising both Hamidullah and himself, he had an explosion of nerves. "But who does give me assistance? No one is my friend. All are traitors, even my own children. I have had enough of friends." "I was going to suggest we go behind the purdah, but your three treacherous children are there, so you will not want to." "I am sorry, it is ever since I was in prison my temper is strange; take me, forgive me." "Nureddin's mother is visiting my wife now. That is all right, I think." "They come before me separately, but not so far together. You had better prepare them for the united shock of my face." "No, let us surprise them without warning, far too much nonsense still goes on among our ladies. They pretended at the time of your trial they would give up purdah! indeed, those of them who can write composed a document to that effect, and now it ends in humbug. You know how deeply they all respect Fielding, but not one of them has seen him. My wife says she will, but always when he calls there is some excuse--she is not feeling well, she is ashamed of the room, she has no nice sweets to offer him, only Elephants' Ears, and if I say Elephants' Ears are Mr. Fielding's favourite sweet, she replies that he will know how badly hers are made, so she cannot see him on their account. For fifteen years, my dear boy, have I argued with my begum, for fifteen years, and never gained a point, yet the missionaries inform us our women are down-trodden. If you want a subject for a poem, take this: The Indian lady as she is and not as she is supposed to be."

CHAPTER XXXI

Aziz had no sense of evidence. The sequence of his emotions decided his beliefs, and led to the tragic coolness between himself and his English friend. They had conquered but were not to be crowned. Fielding was away at a conference, and after the rumour about Miss Quested had been with him undisturbed for a few days, he assumed it was true. He had no objection on moral grounds to his friends amusing themselves, and Cyril, being middle-aged, could no longer expect the pick of the female market, and must take his amusement where he could find it. But he resented him making up to this particular woman, whom he still regarded as his enemy also, why had he not been told? What is friendship without confidences? He himself had told things sometimes regarded as shocking, and the Englishman had listened, tolerant, but surrendering nothing in return. He met Fielding at the railway station on his return, agreed to dine with him, and then started taxing him by the oblique method, outwardly merry. An avowed European scandal there was--Mr. McBryde and Miss Derek. Miss Derek's faithful attachment to Chandrapore was now explained: Mr. McBryde had been caught in her room, and his wife was divorcing him. "That pure-minded fellow. However, he will blame the Indian climate. Everything is our fault really. Now, have I not discovered an important piece of news for you, Cyril?" "Not very," said Fielding, who took little interest in distant sins. "Listen to mine." Aziz's face lit up. "At the conference, it was settled." "This evening will do for schoolmastery. I should go straight to the Minto now, the cholera looks bad. We begin to have local cases as well as imported. In fact, the whole of life is somewhat sad. The new Civil Surgeon is the same as the last, but does not yet dare to be. That is all any administrative change amounts to. All my suffering has won nothing for us. But look here, Cyril, while I remember it. There's gossip about you as well as McBryde. They say that you and Miss Quested became also rather too intimate friends. To speak perfectly frankly, they say you and she have been guilty of impropriety." "They would say that." "It's all over the town, and may injure your reputation. You know, every one is by no means your supporter. I have tried all I could to silence such a story." "Don't bother. Miss Quested has cleared out at last." "It is those who stop in the country, not those who leave it, whom such a story injures. Imagine my dismay and anxiety. I could scarcely get a wink of sleep. First my name was coupled with her and now it is yours." "Don't use such exaggerated phrases." "As what?" "As dismay and anxiety." "Have I not lived all my life in

India? Do I not know what produces a bad impression here?" His voice shot up rather crossly. "Yes, but the scale, the scale. You always get the scale wrong, my dear fellow. A pity there is this rumour, but such a very small pity--so small that we may as well talk of something else." "You mind for Miss Quested's sake, though. I can see from your face." "As far as I do mind. I travel light." "Cyril, that boastfulness about travelling light will be your ruin. It is raising up enemies against you on all sides, and makes me feel excessively uneasy." "'What enemies?" Since Aziz had only himself in mind, he could not reply. Feeling a fool, he became angrier. "I have given you list after list of the people who cannot be trusted in this city. In your position I should have the sense to know I was surrounded by enemies. You observe I speak in a low voice. It is because I see your sais is new. How do I know he isn't a spy?" He lowered his voice: "Every third servant is a spy." "Now, what is the matter?" he asked, smiling. "Do you contradict my last remark?" "It simply doesn't affect me. Spies are as thick as mosquitoes, but it's years before I shall meet the one that kills me. You've something else in your mind." "I've not; don't be ridiculous." "You have. You're cross with me about something or other." Any direct attack threw him out of action. Presently he said: "So you and Madamsell Adela used to amuse one another in the evening, naughty boy." Those drab and high-minded talks had scarcely made for dalliance. Fielding was so startled at the story being taken seriously, and so disliked being called a naughty boy, that he lost his head and cried: "You little rotter! Well, I'm damned. Amusement indeed. Is it likely at such a time?" "Oh, I beg your pardon, I'm sure. The licentious Oriental imagination was at work," he replied, speaking gaily, but cut to the heart; for hours after his mistake he bled inwardly. "You see, Aziz, the circumstances . . . also the girl was still engaged to Heaslop, also I never felt . . ." "Yes, yes; but you didn't contradict what I said, so I thought it was true. Oh dear, East and West. Most misleading. Will you please put your little rotter down at his hospital?" "You're not offended?" "Most certainly I am not." "If you are, this must be cleared up later on." "It has been," he answered, dignified. "I believe absolutely what you say, and of that there need be no further question." "But the way I said it must be cleared up. I was unintentionally rude. Unreserved regrets." "The fault is entirely mine." Tangles like this still interrupted their intercourse. A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry. Fielding had been startled, not shocked, but how convey the difference? There is always trouble when two people do not think of sex at the same moment, always mutual resentment and surprise, even when the two people are of the same race. He began to recapitulate his feelings about Miss Quested. Aziz cut him short with: "But I believe you, I believe. Mohammed Latif shall be severely punished for inventing this." "Oh, leave it alone, like all gossip--it's merely one of those half-alive things that try to crowd out real life. Take no notice, it'll vanish, like poor old Mrs. Moore's tombs." "Mohammed Latif has taken to intriguing. We are already much displeased with him. Will it satisfy you if we send him back to his family without a present?" "We'll discuss M.L. at dinner." His eyes went clotted and hard. "Dinner. This is most unlucky--I forgot. I have promised to dine with Das." "Bring Das to me." "He will have invited other friends." "You are coming to dinner with me as arranged," said Fielding, looking away. "I don't stand this. You are coming to dinner with me. You come." They had reached the hospital now. Fielding continued round the Maidan alone. He was annoyed with himself, but counted on dinner to pull things straight. At the post office he saw the Collector. Their vehicles were parked side by side while their servants competed in the interior of the building. "Good morning; so you are back," said Turton icily. "I should be glad if you will put in your appearance at the club this evening." "I have accepted re-election, sir. Do you regard it as necessary I should come? I should be glad to be excused; indeed, I have a dinner engagement this evening." "It is not a question of your feelings, but of the wish of the Lieutenant-Governor. Perhaps you will ask me whether I speak officially. I do. I shall expect you this evening at six. We shall not interfere with your subsequent plans." He attended the grim little function in due course. The skeletons of hospitality rattled--" Have a peg, have a drink." He talked for five minutes to Mrs. Blakiston, who was the only surviving female. He talked to McBryde, who was defiant about his divorce, conscious that he had sinned as a sahib. He talked to Major Roberts, the new Civil Surgeon; and to young Milner, the new City Magistrate; but the more the club changed, the more it promised to be the same thing. "It is no good," he thought, as he returned past the mosque, "we all build upon sand; and the more modern the country gets, the worse'll be the crash. In the old eighteenth century, when cruelty and injustice raged, an invisible power repaired their ravages. Everything echoes now; there's no stopping the echo. The original sound may be harmless, but the echo is always evil." This reflection about an echo lay at the verge of Fielding's mind. He could never develop it. It belonged to the universe that he had missed or rejected. And the mosque missed it too. Like himself, those shallow arcades provided but a limited asylum. "There is no God but God" doesn't carry us far through the complexities of matter and spirit; it is only a game with words, really, a religious pun, not a religious truth. He found Aziz overtired and dispirited, and he determined not to allude to their misunderstanding until the end of the evening; it would be more acceptable then. He made a clean breast about the club--said he had only gone under compulsion, and should never attend again unless the order was renewed. "In other words, probably never; for I am going quite soon to England." "I thought you might end in England," he said very quietly, then changed the conversation. Rather awkwardly they ate their dinner, then went out to sit in the Mogul garden-house. "I am only going for a little time. On official business. My service is anxious to get me away from Chandrapore for a bit. It is obliged to value me highly, but does not care for me. The situation is somewhat humorous." "What is the nature of the business? Will it leave you much spare time?" "Enough to see my friends." "I expected you to make such a reply. You are a faithful friend. Shall we now talk about something

else?" "Willingly. What subject?" "Poetry," he said, with tears in his eyes. "Let us discuss why poetry has lost the power of making men brave. My mother's father was also a poet, and fought against you in the Mutiny. I might equal him if there was another mutiny. As it is, I am a doctor, who has won a case and has three children to support, and whose chief subject of conversation is official plans." "Let us talk about poetry." He turned his mind to the innocuous subject. "You people are sadly circumstanced. Whatever are you to write about? You cannot say, 'The rose is faded,' for evermore. We know it's faded. Yet you can't have patriotic poetry of the 'India, my India' type, when it's nobody's India." "I like this conversation. It may lead to something interesting." "You are quite right in thinking that poetry must touch life. When I knew you first, you used it as an incantation." "I was a child when you knew me first. Everyone was my friend then. The Friend: a Persian expression for God. But I do not want to be a religious poet either." "I hoped you would be." "Why, when you yourself are an atheist?" "There is something in religion that may not be true, but has not yet been sung." "Explain in detail." "Something that the Hindus have perhaps found." "Let them sing it." "Hindus are unable to sing." "Cyril, you sometimes make a sensible remark. That will do for poetry for the present. Let us now return to your English visit." "We haven't discussed poetry for two seconds," said the other, smiling. But Aziz was addicted to cameos. He held the tiny conversation in his hand, and felt it epitomized his problem. For an instant he recalled his wife, and, as happens when a memory is intense, the past became the future, and he saw her with him in a quiet Hindu jungle native state, far away from foreigners. He said: "I suppose you will visit Miss Quested." "If I have time. It will be strange seeing her in Hampstead." "What is Hampstead?" "An artistic and thoughtful little suburb of London--" "And there she lives in comfort: you will enjoy seeing her. . . . Dear me, I've got a headache this evening. Perhaps I am going to have cholera. With your permission, I'll leave early." "When would you like the carriage?" "Don't trouble--I'll bike." "But you haven't got your bicycle. My carriage fetched you--let it take you away." "Sound reasoning," he said, trying to be gay. "I have not got my bicycle. But I am seen too often in your carriage. I am thought to take advantage of your generosity by Mr. Ram Chand." He was out of sorts and uneasy. The conversation jumped from topic to topic in a broken-backed fashion. They were affectionate and intimate, but nothing clicked tight. "Aziz, you have forgiven me the stupid remark I made this morning?" "When you called me a little rotter?" "Yes, to my eternal confusion. You know how fond I am of you." "That is nothing, of course; we all of us make mistakes. In a friendship such as ours a few slips are of no consequence." But as he drove off, something depressed him--a dull pain of body or mind, waiting to rise to the surface. When he reached the bungalow he wanted to return and say something very affectionate; instead, he gave the sais a heavy tip, and sat down gloomily on the bed, and Hassan massaged him incompetently. The eye-flies had colonized the top of an almeira; the red stains on the durry were thicker, for Mohammed Latif had slept here during his imprisonment and spat a good deal; the table drawer was scarred where the police had forced it open; everything in Chandrapore was used up, including the air. The trouble rose to the surface now: he was suspicious; he suspected his friend of intending to marry Miss Quested for the sake of her money, and of going to England for that purpose. "Huzoor? "--for he had muttered. "Look at those flies on the ceiling. Why have you not drowned them?" "Huzoor, they return." "Like all evil things." To divert the conversation, Hassan related how the kitchen-boy had killed a snake, good, but killed it by cutting it in two, bad, because it becomes two snakes. "When he breaks a plate, does it become two plates?" "Glasses and a new teapot will similarly be required, also for myself a coat." Aziz sighed. Each for himself. One man needs a coat, another a rich wife; each approaches his goal by a clever detour. Fielding had saved the girl a fine of twenty thousand rupees, and now followed her to England. If he desired to marry her, all was explained; she would bring him a larger dowry. Aziz did not believe his own suspicions--better if he had, for then he would have denounced and cleared the situation up. Suspicion and belief could in his mind exist side by side. They sprang from different sources, and need never intermingle. Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumour, a mental malady, that makes him self-conscious and unfriendly suddenly; he trusts and mistrusts at the same time in a way the Westerner cannot comprehend. It is his demon, as the Westerner's is hypocrisy. Aziz was seized by it, and his fancy built a satanic castle, of which the foundation had been laid when he talked at Dilkusha under the stars. The girl had surely been Cyril's mistress when she stopped in the College--Mohammed Latif was right. But was that all? Perhaps it was Cyril who followed her into the cave. . . . No; impossible. Cyril hadn't been on the Kawa Dol at all. Impossible. Ridiculous. Yet the fancy left him trembling with misery. Such treachery--if true--would have been the worst in Indian history; nothing so vile, not even the murder of Afzul Khan by Sivaji. He was shaken, as though by a truth, and told Hassan to leave him. Next day he decided to take his children back to Mussoorie. They had come down for the trial, that he might bid them farewell, and had stayed on at Hamidullah's for the rejoicings. Major Roberts would give him leave, and during his absence Fielding would go off to England. The idea suited both his beliefs and his suspicions. Events would prove which was right, and preserve, in either case, his dignity. Fielding was conscious of something hostile, and because he was really fond of Aziz his optimism failed him. Travelling light is less easy as soon as affection is involved. Unable to jog forward in the serene hope that all would come right, he wrote an elaborate letter in the rather modern style: "It is on my mind that you think me a prude about women. I had rather you thought anything else of me. If I live impeccably now, it is only because I am well on the forties--a period of revision. In the eighties I shall revise again. And before the nineties come--I shall be revised! But, alive or dead, I am absolutely devoid of morals. Do kindly grasp this about me." Aziz did not care for the letter at all. It hurt his delicacy. He liked confidences, however gross, but

generalizations and comparisons always repelled him. Life is not a scientific manual. He replied coldly, regretting his inability to return from Mussoorie before his friend sailed: "But I must take my poor little holiday while I can. All must be economy henceforward, all hopes of Kashmir have vanished for ever and ever. When you return I shall be slaving far away in some new post." And Fielding went, and in the last gutterings of Chandrapore--heaven and earth both looking like toffee--the Indian's bad fancies were confirmed. His friends encouraged them, for though they had liked the Principal, they felt uneasy at his getting to know so much about their private affairs. Mahmoud Ali soon declared that treachery was afoot. Hamidullah murmured, "Certainly of late he no longer addressed us with his former frankness," and warned Aziz "not to expect too much-- he and she are, after all, both members of another race." "Where are my twenty thousand rupees?" he thought. He was absolutely indifferent to money--not merely generous with it, but promptly paying his debts when he could remember to do so--yet these rupees haunted his mind, because he had been tricked about them, and allowed them to escape overseas, like so much of the wealth of India. Cyril would marry Miss Quested--he grew certain of it, all the unexplained residue of the Marabar contributing. It was the natural conclusion of the horrible senseless picnic, and before long he persuaded himself that the wedding had actually taken place.

CHAPTER XXXII

Egypt was charming--a green strip of carpet and walking up and down it four sorts of animals and one sort of man. Fielding's business took him there for a few days. He re-embarked at Alexandria--bright blue sky, constant wind, clean low coast-line, as against the intricacies of Bombay. Crete welcomed him next with the long snowy ridge of its mountains, and then came Venice. As he landed on the piazzetta a cup of beauty was lifted to his lips, and he drank with a sense of disloyalty. The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas in poor India everything was placed wrong. He had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? Form stammered here and there in a mosque, became rigid through nervousness even, but oh these Italian churches! San Giorgio standing on the island which could scarcely have risen from the waves without it, the Salute holding the entrance of a canal which, but for it, would not be the Grand Canal! In the old undergraduate days he had wrapped himself up in the manycoloured blanket of St. Mark's, but something more precious than mosaics and marbles was offered to him now: the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form, with flesh and blood subsisting. Writing picture post-cards to his Indian friends, he felt that all of them would miss the joys he experienced now, the joys of form, and that this constituted a serious barrier. They would see the sumptuousness of Venice, not its shape, and though Venice was not Europe, it was part of the Mediterranean harmony. The Mediterranean is the human norm. When men leave that exquisite lake, whether through the Bosphorus or the Pillars of Hercules, they approach the monstrous and extraordinary; and the southern exit leads to the strangest experience of all. Turning his back on it yet again, he took the train northward, and tender romantic fancies that he thought were dead for ever, flowered when he saw the buttercups and daisies of June.

PART III: TEMPLE

CHAPTER XXXIII

Some hundreds of miles westward of the Marabax Hills, and two years later in time, Professor Narayan Godbole stands in the presence of God. God is not born yet--that will occur at midnight--but He has also been born centuries ago, nor can He ever be born, because He is the Lord of the Universe, who transcends human processes. He is, was not, is not, was. He and Professor Godbole stood at opposite ends of the same strip of carpet.

"Tukaram, Tukaram, Thou art my father and mother and everybody. Tukaram, Tukaram, Thou art my father and mother and everybody. Tukaram, Tukaram, Thou art my father and mother and everybody. Tukaram, Tukaram, Thou art my father and mother and everybody. Tukaram . . ."

This corridor in the palace at Mau opened through other corridors into a courtyard. It was of beautiful hard white stucco, but its pillars and vaulting could scarcely be seen behind coloured rags, iridescent balls, chandeliers of opaque pink glass, and murky photographs framed crookedly. At the end was the small but famous shrine of the dynastic cult, and the God to be born was largely a silver image the size of a teaspoon. Hindus sat on either side of the carpet where they could find room, or overflowed into the adjoining corridors and the courtyard--Hindus, Hindus only, mild-featured men, mostly villagers, for whom anything outside their villages passed in a dream. They were the toiling ryot, whom some call the real India. Mixed with them sat a few tradesmen out of the little town, officials, courtiers, scions of the ruling house. Schoolboys kept inefficient order. The assembly was in a tender, happy state unknown to an English crowd, it seethed like a beneficent potion. When the villagers broke cordon for a glimpse of the silver image, a most beautiful and radiant

expression came into their faces, a beauty in which there was nothing personal, for it caused them all to resemble one another during the moment of its indwelling, and only when it was withdrawn did they revert to individual clods. And so with the music. Music there was, but from so many sources that the sum-total was untrammelled. The braying banging crooning melted into a single mass which trailed round the palace before joining the thunder. Rain fell at intervals throughout the night. It was the turn of Professor Godbole's choir. As Minister of Education, he gained this special honour. When the previous group of singers dispersed into the crowd, he pressed forward from the back, already in full voice, that the chain of sacred sounds might be uninterrupted. He was barefoot and in white, he wore a pale blue turban; his gold pince-nez had caught in a jasmine garland, and lay sideways down his nose. He and the six colleagues who supported him clashed their cymbals, hit small drums, droned upon a portable harmonium, and sang:

"Tukaram, Tukaram, Thou art my father and mother and everybody. Tukaram, Tukaram, Thou art my father and mother and everybody. Tukaram, Tukaram . . ."

They sang not even to the God who confronted them, but to a saint; they did not one thing which the non-Hindu would feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form. Where was the God Himself, in whose honour the congregation had gathered? Indistinguishable in the jumble of His own altar, huddled out of sight amid images of inferior descent, smothered under rose-leaves, overhung by oleographs, outbiazed by golden tablets representing the Rajah's ancestors, and entirely obscured, when the wind blew, by the tattered foliage of a banana. Hundreds of electric lights had been lit in His honour (worked by an engine whose thumps destroyed the rhythm of the hymn). Yet His face could not be seen. Hundreds of His silver dishes were piled around Him with the minimum of effect. The inscriptions which the poets of the State had composed were hung where they could not be read, or had twitched their drawing-pins out of the stucco, and one of them (composed in English to indicate His universality) consisted, by an unfortunate slip of the draughtsman, of the words, "God si Love." God si Love. Is this the first message of India?

"Tukaram, Tukaram . . ."

continued the choir, reinforced by a squabble behind the purdah curtain, where two mothers tried to push their children at the same moment to the front. A little girl's leg shot out like an eel. In the courtyard, drenched by the rain, the small Europeanized band stumbled off into a waltz. "Nights of Gladness" they were playing. The singers were not perturbed by this rival, they lived beyond competition. It was long before the tiny fragment of Professor Godbole that attended to outside things decided that his pince-nez was in trouble, and that until it was adjusted he could not choose a new hymn. He laid down one cymbal, with the other he clashed the air, with his free hand he fumbled at the flowers round his neck. A colleague assisted him. Singing into one an other's grey moustaches, they disentangled the chain from the tinsel into which it had sunk. Godbole consulted the music-book, said a word to the drummer, who broke rhythm, made a thick little blur of sound, and produced a new rhythm. This was more exciting, the inner images it evoked more definite, and the singers' expressions became fatuous and languid. They loved all men, the whole universe, and scraps of their past, tiny splinters of detail, emerged for a moment to melt into the universal warmth. Thus Godbole, though she was not important to him, remembered an old woman he had met in Chandrapore days. Chance brought her into his mind while it was in this heated state, he did not select her, she happened to occur among the throng of soliciting images, a tiny splinter, and he impelled her by his spiritual force to that place where completeness can be found. Completeness, not reconstruction. His senses grew thinner, he remembered a wasp seen he forgot where, perhaps on a stone. He loved the wasp equally, he impelled it likewise, he was imitating God. And the stone where the wasp clung--could he . . . no, he could not, he had been wrong to attempt the stone, logic and conscious effort had seduced, he came back to the strip of red carpet and discovered that he was dancing upon it. Up and down, a third of the way to the altar and back again, clashing his cymbals, his little legs twinkling, his companions dancing with him and each other. Noise, noise, the Europeanized band louder, incense on the altar, sweat, the blaze of lights, wind in the bananas, noise, thunder, eleven-fifty by his wrist-watch, seen as he threw up his hands and detached the tiny reverberation that was his soul. Louder shouts in the crowd. He danced on. The boys and men who were squatting in the aisles were lifted forcibly and dropped without changing their shapes into the laps of their neighbours. Down the path thus cleared advanced a litter. It was the aged ruler of the state, brought against the advice of his physicians to witness the Birth ceremony. No one greeted the Rajah, nor did he wish it; this was no moment for human glory. Nor could the litter be set down, lest it defiled the temple by becoming a throne. He was lifted out of it while its feet remained in air, and deposited on the carpet close to the altar, his immense beard was straightened, his legs tucked under him, a paper containing red powder was placed in his hand. There he sat, leaning against a pillar, exhausted with illness, his eyes magnified by many unshed tears. He had not to wait long. In a land where all else was unpunctual, the hour of the Birth was chronometrically observed. Three minutes before it was due, a Brahman brought forth a model of the village of Gokul (the Bethlehem in that nebulous story) and placed it in front of the altar. The model was on a wooden tray about a yard square; it was of clay, and was

gaily blue and white with streamers and paint. Here, upon a chair too small for him and with a head too large, sat King Kansa, who is Herod, directing the murder of some Innocents, and in a corner, similarly proportioned, stood the father and mother of the Lord, warned to depart in a dream. The model was not holy, but more than a decoration, for it diverted men from the actual image of the God, and increased their sacred bewilderment. Some of the villagers thought the Birth had occurred, saying with truth that the Lord must have been born, or they could not see Him. But the clock struck midnight, and simultaneously the rending note of the conch broke forth, followed by the trumpeting of elephants; all who had packets of powder threw them at the altar, and in the rosy dust and incense, and clanging and shouts, Infinite Love took upon itself the form of SHRI KRISHNA, and saved the world. All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear. Some jumped in the air, others flung themselves prone and embraced the bare feet of the universal lover; the women behind the purdah slapped and shrieked; the little girl slipped out and danced by herself, her black pigtails flying. Not an orgy of the body; the tradition of that shrine forbade it. But the human spirit had tried by a desperate contortion to ravish the unknown, flinging down science and history in the struggle, yes, beauty herself. Did it succeed? Books written afterwards say "Yes." But how, if there is such an event, can it be remembered afterwards? How can it be expressed in anything but itself? Not only from the unbeliever are mysteries hid, but the adept himself cannot retain them. He may think, if he chooses, that he has been with God, but as soon as he thinks it, it becomes history, and falls under the rules of time. A cobra of papier-m��ow appeared on the carpet, also a wooden cradle swinging from a frame. Professor Godbole approached the latter with a red silk napkin in his arms. The napkin was God, not that it was, and the image remained in the blur of the altar. It was just a napkin, folded into a shape which indicated a baby's. The Professor dandled it and gave it to the Rajah, who, making a great effort, said, "I name this child Shri Krishna," and tumbled it into the cradle. Tears poured from his eyes, because he had seen the Lord's salvation. He was too weak to exhibit the silk baby to his people, his privilege in former years. His attendants lifted him up, a new path was cleared through the crowd, and he was carried away to a less sacred part of the palace. There, in a room accessible to Western science by an outer staircase, his physician, Dr. Aziz, awaited him. His Hindu physician, who had accompanied him to the shrine, briefly reported his symptoms. As the ecstasy receded, the invalid grew fretful. The bumping of the steam engine that worked the dynamo disturbed him, and he asked for what reason it had been introduced into his home. They replied that they would enquire, and administered a sedative. Down in the sacred corridors, joy had seethed to jollity. It was their duty to play various games to amuse the newly born God, and to simulate his sports with the wanton dairyniaids of Brindaban. Butter played a prominent part in these. When the cradle had been removed, the principal nobles of the state gathered together for an innocent frolic. They removed their turbans, and one put a lump of butter on his forehead, and waited for it to slide down his nose into his mouth. Before it could arrive, another stole up behind him, snatched the melting morsel, and swallowed it himself. All laughed exultantly at discovering that the divine sense of humour coincided with their own. "God si love!" There is fun in heaven. God can play practical jokes upon Himself, draw chairs away from beneath His own posteriors, set His own turbans on fire, and steal His own petticoats when He bathes. By sacrificing good taste, this worship achieved what Christianity has shirked: the inclusion of merriment. All spirit as well as all matter must participate in salvation, and if practical jokes are banned, the circle is incomplete. Having swallowed the butter, they played another game which chanced to be graceful: the fondling of Shri Krishna under the similitude of a child. A pretty red and gold ball is thrown, and he who catches it chooses a child from the crowd, raises it in his arms, and carries it round to be caressed. All stroke the darling creature for the Creator's sake, and murmur happy words. The child is restored to his parents, the ball thrown on, and another child becomes for a moment the World's desire. And the Lord bounds hither and thither through the aisles, chance, and the sport of chance, irradiating little mortals with His immortality. . . . When they had played this long enough--and being exempt from boredom, they played it again and again, they played it again and again--they took many sticks and hit them together, whack smack, as though they fought the Pandava wars, and threshed and churned with them, and later on they hung from the roof of the temple, in a net, a great black earthenware jar, which was painted here and there with red, and wreathed with dried figs. Now came a rousing sport. Springing up, they struck at the jar with their sticks. It cracked, broke, and a mass of greasy rice and milk poured on to their faces. They ate and smeared one another's mouths and dived between each other's legs for what had been pashed upon the carpet. This way and that spread the divine mess, until the line of schoolboys, who had somewhat fended off the crowd, broke for their share. The corridors, the courtyard, were filled with benign confusion. Also the flies awoke and claimed their share of God's bounty. There was no quarrelling, owing to the nature of the gift, for blessed is the man who confers it on another, he imitates God. And those "imitations," those "substitutions," continued to flicker through the assembly for many hours, awaking in each man, according to his capacity, an emotion that he would not have had otherwise. No definite image survived; at the Birth it was questionable whether a silver doll or a mud village, or a silk napkin, or an intangible spirit, or a pious resolution, had been born. Perhaps all these things! Perhaps none! Perhaps all birth is an allegory! Still, it was the main event of the religious year. It caused strange thoughts. Covered with grease and dust, Professor Godbole had once more developed the life of his spirit. He had, with increasing vividness, again seen Mrs. Moore, and round her faintly clinging forms of trouble. He was a

Brahman, she Christian, but it made no difference, it made no difference whether she was a trick of his memory or a telepathic appeal. It was his duty, as it was his desire, to place himself in the position of the God and to love her, and to place himself in her position and to say to the God, "Come, come, come, come." This was all he could do. How inadequate! But each according to his own capacities, and he knew that his own were small. "One old Englishwoman and one little, little wasp," he thought, as he stepped out of the temple into the grey of a pouring wet morning. "It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself."

CHAPTER XXXIV

Dr. Aziz left the palace at the same time. As he returned to his house--which stood in a pleasant garden further up the main street of the town--he could see his old patron paddling and capering in the slush ahead. "Hullo!" he called, and it was the wrong remark, for the devotee indicated by circular gestures of his arms that he did not desire to be disturbed. He added, "Sorry," which was right, for Godbole twisted his head till it didn't belong to his body, and said in a strained voice that had no connection with his mind: "He arrived at the European Guest House perhaps--at least possibly." "Did he? Since when?" But time was too definite. He waved his arm more dimly and disappeared. Aziz knew who "he" was-- Fielding--but he refused to think about him, because it disturbed his life, and he still trusted the floods to prevent him from arriving. A fine little river issued from his garden gate and gave him much hope. It was impossible that anyone could get across from Deora in such weather as this. Fielding's visit was official. He had been transferred from Chandrapore, and sent on a tour through Central India to see what the remoter states were doing with regard to English education. He had married, he had done the expected with Miss Quested, and Aziz had no wish to see him again. "Dear old Godbole," he thought, and smiled. He had no religious curiosity, and had never discovered the meaning of this annual antic, but he was well assured that Godbole was a dear old man. He had come to Man through him and remained on his account. Without him he could never have grasped problems so totally different from those of Chandrapore. For here the cleavage was between Brahman and non-Brahman; Moslems and English were quite out of the running, and sometimes not mentioned for days. Since Godbole was a Brahman, Aziz was one also for purposes of intrigue: they would often joke about it together. The fissures in the Indian soil are infinite: Hinduism, so solid from a distance, is riven into sects and clans, which radiate and join, and change their names according to the aspect from which they are approached. Study it for years with the best teachers, and when you raise your head, nothing they have told you quite fits. Aziz, the day of his inauguration, had remarked: "I study nothing, I respect"--making an excellent impression. There was now a minimum of prejudice against him. Nominally under a Hindu doctor, he was really chief medicine man to the court. He had to drop inoculation and such Western whims, but even at Chandrapore his profession had been a game, centering round the operating table, and here in the backwoods he let his instruments rust, ran his little hospital at half steam, and caused no undue alarm. His impulse to escape from the English was sound. They had frightened him permanently, and there are only two reactions against fright: to kick and scream on committees, or to retreat to a remote jungle, where the sahib seldom comes. His old lawyer friends wanted him to stop in British India and help agitate, and might have prevailed, but for the treachery of Fielding. The news had not surprised him in the least. A rift had opened between them after the trial when Cyril had not joined in his procession; those advocacies of the girl had increased it; then came the post-cards from Venice, so cold, so unfriendly that all agreed that something was wrong; and finally, after a silence, the expected letter from Hampstead. Mahmoud Ali was with him at the time. "Some news that will surprise you. I am to marry someone whom you know. . . ." He did not read further. "Here it comes, answer for me--" and he threw it to Mahmoud Ali. Subsequent letters he destroyed unopened. It was the end of a foolish experiment. And though sometimes at the back of his mind he felt that Fielding had made sacrifices for him, it was now all confused with his genuine hatred of the English. "I am an Indian at last," he thought, standing motionless in the rain. Life passed pleasantly, the climate was healthy so that the children could be with him all the year round, and he had married again--not exactly a marriage, but he liked to regard it as one--and he read his Persian, wrote his poetry, had his horse, and sometimes got some shikar while the good Hindus looked the other way. His poems were all on one topic--Oriental womanhood. "The purdah must go," was their burden, "otherwise we shall never be free." And he declared (fantastically) that India would not have been conquered if women as well as men had fought at Plassy. "But we do not show our women to the foreigner"--not explaining how this was to be managed, for he was writing a poem. Bulbuls and roses would still persist, the pathos of defeated Islam remained in his blood and could not be expelled by modernities. Illogical poems--like their writer. Yet they struck a true note: there cannot be a mother-land without new homes. In one poem--the only one funny old Godbole liked--he had skipped over the mother-land (whom he did not truly love) and gone straight to internationality. "Ah, that is bhakti; ah, my young friend, that is different and very good. Ah, India, who seems not to move, will go straight there while the other nations waste their time. May I translate this particular one into Hindi? In fact, it might be rendered into Sanskrit almost, it is so enlightened. Yes, of course, all your other poems are very good too. His Highness was saying to Colonel Maggs last time he came that we are proud of you"--simpering slightly. Colonel Maggs was the Political Agent for the neighbourhood and Aziz' dejected opponent. The Criminal Investigation Department kept an eye on Aziz ever since the trial--they had nothing actionable against him, but Indians who have been unfortunate must be watched, and to the end of

his life he remained under observation, thanks to Miss Quested's mistake. Colonel Maggs learnt with concern that a suspect was coming to Mau, and, adopting a playful manner, rallied the old Rajah for permitting a Moslem doctor to approach his sacred person. A few years ago, the Rajah would have taken the hint, for the Political Agent then had been a formidable figure, descending with all the thunders of Empire when it was most inconvenient, turning the polity inside out, requiring motor-cars and tiger-hunts, trees cut down that impeded the view from the Guest House, cows milked in his presence, and generally arrogating the control of internal affairs. But there had been a change of policy in high quarters. Local thunders were no longer endorsed, and the group of little states that composed the agency discovered this and began comparing notes with fruitful result. To see how much, or how little, Colonel Maggs would stand, became an agreeable game at Mau, which was played by all the departments of State. He had to stand the appointment of Dr. Aziz. The Rajah did not take the hint, but replied that Hindus were less exclusive than formerly, thanks to the enlightened commands of the Viceroy, and he felt it his duty to move with the times. Yes, all had gone well hitherto, but now, when the rest of the state was plunged in its festival, he had a crisis of a very different sort. A note awaited him at his house. There was no doubt that Fielding had arrived overnight, nor much doubt that Godbole knew of his arrival, for the note was addressed to him, and he had read it before sending it on to Aziz, and had written in the margin, "Is not this delightful news, but unfortunately my religious duties prevent me from taking any action." Fielding announced that he had inspected Mudkul (Miss Derek's former preserve), that he had nearly been drowned at Deora, that he had reached Mau according to time-table, and hoped to remain there two days, studying the various educational innovations of his old friend. Nor had he come alone. His wife and her brother accompanied him. And then the note turned into the sort of note that always did arrive from the State Guest House. Wanting something. No eggs. Mosquito nets torn. When would they pay their respects to His Highness? Was it correct that a torchlight procession would take place? If so, might they view it? They didn't want to give trouble, but if they might stand in a balcony, or if they might go out in a boat. . . . Aziz tore the note up. He had had enough of showing Miss Quested native life. Treacherous hideous harridan! Bad people altogether. He hoped to avoid them, though this might be difficult, for they would certainly be held up for several days at Mau. Down country, the floods were even worse, and the pale grey faces of lakes had appeared in the direction of the Asirgarh railway station.

CHAPTER XXXV

Long before he discovered Mau, another young Mohammedan had retired there--a saint. His mother said to him, "Free prisoners." So he took a sword and went up to the fort. He unlocked a door, and the prisoners streamed out and resumed their previous occupations, but the police were too much annoyed and cut off the young man's head. Ignoring its absence, he made his way over the rocks that separate the fort and the town, killing policemen as he went, and he fell outside his mother's house, having accomplished her orders. Consequently there are two shrines to him to-day--that of the Head above, and that of the Body below--and they are worshipped by the few Mohammedans who live near, and by Hindus also. "There is no God but God"; that symmetrical injunction melts in the mild airs of Man; it belongs to pilgrimages and universities, not to feudalism and agriculture. When Aziz arrived, and found that even Islam was idolatrous, he grew scornful, and longed to purify the place, like Alamgir. But soon he didn't mind, like Akbar. After all, this saint had freed prisoners, and he himself had lain in prison. The Shrine of the Body lay in his own garden and produced a weekly crop of lamps and flowers, and when he saw them he recalled his sufferings. The Shrine of the Head made a nice short walk for the children. He was off duty the morning after the great pujah, and he told them to come. Jemila held his hand. Ahmed and Karim ran in front, arguing what the body looked like as it came staggering down, and whether they would have been frightened if they met it. He didn't want them to grow up superstitious, so he rebuked them, and they answered yes, father, for they were well brought up, but, like himself, they were impervious to argument, and after a polite pause they continued saying what their natures compelled them to say. A slim, tall eight-sided building stood at the top of the slope, among some bushes. This was the Shrine of the Head. It had not been roofed, and was indeed merely a screen. Inside it crouched a humble dome, and inside that, visible through a grille, was a truncated gravestone, swathed in calico. The inner angles of the screen were cumbered with bees' nests, and a gentle shower of broken wings and other aerial oddments kept falling, and had strewn the damp pavement with their flue. Ahmed, apprized by Mohammed Latif of the character of the bee, said, "They will not hurt us, whose lives are chaste," and pushed boldly in; his sister was more cautious. From the shrine they went to a mosque, which, in size and design, resembled a fire-screen; the arcades of Chandrapore had shrunk to a flat piece of ornamental stucco, with protuberances at either end to suggest minarets. The funny little thing didn't even stand straight, for the rock on which it had been put was slipping down the hill. It, and the shrine, were a strange outcome of the protests of Arabia. They wandered over the old fort, now deserted, and admired the various views. The scenery, according to their standards, was delightful--the sky grey and black, bellyfuls of rain all over it, the earth pocked with pools of water and slimy with mud. A magnificent monsoon-- the best for three years, the tanks already full, bumper crops possible. Out towards the river (the route by which the Fieldings had escaped from Deora) the downpour had been enormous, the mails had to be pulled across by ropes. They could just see the break in the forest trees where the gorge came through, and the rocks above that marked the site of the

diamond mine, glistening with wet. Close beneath was the suburban residence of the Junior Rani, isolated by floods, and Her Highness, lax about purdah, to be seen paddling with her handmaidens in the garden and waving her sari at the monkeys on the roof. But better not look close beneath, perhaps--nor towards the European Guest House either. Beyond the Guest House rose another grey-green gloom of hills, covered with temples like little white flames. There were over two hundred gods in that direction alone, who visited each other constantly, and owned numerous cows, and all the betel-leaf industry, besides having shares in the Asirgarh motor omnibus. Many of them were in the palace at this moment, having the time of their lives; others, too large or proud to travel, had sent symbols to represent them. The air was thick with religion and rain. Their white shirts fluttering, Ahmed and Karim ran about over the fort, shrieking with joy. Presently they intersected a line of prisoners, who were looking aimlessly at an old bronze gun. "Which of you is to be pardoned?" they asked. For to-night was the procession of the Chief God, when He would leave the palace, escorted by the whole power of the State, and pass by the Jail, which stood down in the town now. As He did so, troubling the waters of our civilization, one prisoner would be released, and then He would proceed to the great Mau tank that stretched as far as the Guest House garden, where something else would happen, some final or subsidiary apotheosis, after which He would submit to the experience of sleep. The Aziz family did not grasp as much as this, being Moslem, but the visit to the Jail was common knowledge. Smiling, with downcast eyes, the prisoners discussed with the gentry their chances of salvation. Except for the irons on their legs, they resembled other men, nor did they feel different. Five of them, who had not yet been brought to trial, could expect no pardon, but all who had been convicted were full of hope. They did not distinguish between the God and the Rajah in their minds, both were too far above them; but the guard was better educated, and ventured to enquire after His Highness's health. "It always improves," replied the medicine man. As a matter of fact, the Rajah was dead, the ceremony overnight had overtaxed his strength. His death was being concealed lest the glory of the festival were dimmed. The Hindu physician, the Private Secretary, and a confidential servant remained with the corpse, while Aziz had assumed the duty of being seen in public, and misleading people. He had liked the ruler very much, and might not prosper under his successor, yet he could not worry over such problems yet, for he was involved in the illusion he helped to create. The children continued to run about, hunting for a frog to put in Mohammed Latif's bed, the little fools. Hundreds of frogs lived in their own garden, but they must needs catch one up on the fort. They reported two topis below. Fielding and his brother-in-law, instead of resting after their journey, were climbing the slope to the saint's tomb! "Throw stones?" asked Karim. "Put powdered glass in their pan?" "Ahmed, come here for such wickedness." He raised his hand to smite his firstborn, but allowed it to be kissed instead. It was sweet to have his sons with him at this moment, and to know they were affectionate and brave. He pointed out that the Englishmen were State guests, so must not be poisoned, and received, as always, gentle yet enthusiastic assent to his words. The two visitors entered the octagon, but rushed out at once pursued by some bees. Hither and thither they ran, beating their heads; the children shrieked with derision, and out of heaven, as if a plug had been pulled, fell a jolly dollop of rain. Aziz had not meant to greet his former friend, but the incident put him into an excellent temper. He felt compact and strong. He shouted out, "Hullo, gentlemen, are you in trouble?" The brother-in-law exclaimed; a bee had got him. "Lie down in a pool of water, my dear sir--here are plenty. Don't come near me. . . . I cannot control them, they are State bees; complain to His Highness of their behaviour." There was no real danger, for the rain was increasing. The swarm retired to the shrine. He went up to the stranger and pulled a couple of stings out of his wrist, remarking, "Come, pull yourself together and be a man." "How do you do, Aziz, after all this time? I heard you were settled in here," Fielding called to him, but not in friendly tones. "I suppose a couple of stings don't signify." "Not the least. I'll send an embrocation over to the Guest House. I heard you were settled in there." "Why have you not answered my letters?" he asked, going straight for the point, but not reaching it, owing to buckets of rain. His companion, new to the country, cried, as the drops drummed on his topi, that the bees were renewing their attack. Fielding checked his antics rather sharply, then said: "Is there a short cut down to our carriage? We must give up our walk. The weather's pestilential." "Yes. That way." "Are you not coming down yourself?" Aziz sketched a comic salaam; like all Indians, he was skilful in the slighter impertinences. "I tremble, I obey," the gesture said, and it was not lost upon Fielding. They walked down a rough path to the road--the two men first; the brother-in-law (boy rather than man) next, in a state over his arm, which hurt; the three Indian children last, noisy and impudent--all six wet through. "How goes it, Aziz?" "In my usual health." "Are you making anything out of your life here?" "How much do you make out of yours?" "Who is in charge of the Guest House?" he asked, giving up his slight effort to recapture their intimacy, and growing more official; he was older and sterner. "His Highness's Private Secretary, probably." "Where is he, then?" "I don't know." "Because not a soul's been near us since we arrived." "Really." "I wrote beforehand to the Durbar, and asked if a visit was convenient. I was told it was, and arranged my tour accordingly; but the Guest House servants appear to have no definite instructions, we can't get any eggs, also my wife wants to go out in the boat." "There are two boats." "Exactly, and no oars." "Colonel Maggs broke the oars when here last." "All four?" "He is a most powerful man." "If the weather lifts, we want to see your torchlight procession from the water this evening," he pursued. "I wrote to Godbole about it, but he has taken no notice; it's a place of the dead." "Perhaps your letter never reached the Minister in question." "Will there be any objection to English people watching the procession?" "I know nothing at all about the religion here. I should never think of watching it myself." "We had a very different reception both at Mudkul

and Deora, they were kindness itself at Deora, the Maharajah and Maharani wanted us to see everything." "You should never have left them." "Jump in, Ralph"--they had reached the carriage. "Jump in, Mr. Quested, and Mr. Fielding." "Who on earth is Mr. Quested?" "Do I mispronounce that well-known name? Is he not your wife's brother?" "Who on earth do you suppose I've married?" "I'm only Ralph Moore," said the boy, blushing, and at that moment there fell another pailful of the rain, and made a mist round their feet. Aziz tried to withdraw, but it was too late. "Quested? Quested? Don't you know that my wife was Mrs. Moore's daughter?" He trembled, and went purplish grey; he hated the news, hated hearing the name Moore. "Perhaps this explains your odd attitude?" "And pray what is wrong with my attitude?" "The preposterous letter you allowed Mahmoud Ali to write for you." "This is a very useless conversation, I consider." "However did you make such a mistake?" said Fielding, more friendly than before, but scathing and scornful. "It's almost unbelievable. I should think I wrote you half a dozen times, mentioning my wife by name. Miss Quested! What an extraordinary notion!" From his smile, Aziz guessed that Stella was beautiful. "Miss Quested is our best friend, she introduced us, but . . . what an amazing notion. Aziz, we must thrash this misunderstanding out later on. It is clearly some deviltry of Mahmoud Ali's. He knows perfectly well I married Miss Moore. He called her 'Heaslop's sister' in his insolent letter to me." The name woke furies in him. "So she is, and here is Heaslop's brother, and you his brother-in-law, and goodbye." Shame turned into a rage that brought back his self-respect. "What does it matter to me who you marry? Don't trouble me here at Mau is all I ask. I do not want you, I do not want one of you in my private life, with my dying breath I say it. Yes, yes, I made a foolish blunder; despise me and feel cold. I thought you married my enemy. I never read your letter. Mahmoud Ali deceived me. I thought you'd stolen my money, but"--he clapped his hands together, and his children gathered round him--" it's as if you stole it. I forgive Mahmoud Ali all things, because he loved me." Then pausing, while the rain exploded like pistols, he said, "My heart is for my own people henceforward," and turned away. Cyril followed him through the mud, apologizing, laughing a little, wanting to argue and reconstruct, pointing out with irrefragable logic that he had married, not Heaslop's betrothed, but Heaslop's sister. What difference did it make at this hour of the day? He had built his life on a mistake, but he had built it. Speaking in Urdu, that the children might understand, he said: "Please do not follow us, whomever you marry. I wish no Englishman or Englishwoman to be my friend." He returned to the house excited and happy. It had been an uneasy, uncanny moment when Mrs. Moore's name was mentioned, stirring memories. "Esmiss Esmoor . . ."--as though she was coming to help him. She had always been so good, and that youth whom he had scarcely looked at was her son, Ralph Moore, Stella and Ralph, whom he had promised to be kind to, and Stella had married Cyril.

CHAPTER XXXVI

All the time the palace ceased not to thrum and tum-tum. The revelation was over, but its effect lasted, and its effect was to make men feel that the revelation had not yet come. Hope existed despite fulfilment, as it will be in heaven. Although the God had been born, His procession--loosely supposed by many to be the birth--had not taken place. In normal years, the middle hours of this day were signalized by performances of great beauty in the private apartments of the Rajah. He owned a consecrated troupe of men and boys, whose duty it was to dance various actions and meditations of his faith before him. Seated at his ease, he could witness the Three Steps by which the Saviour ascended the universe to the discomfiture of Indra, also the death of the dragon, the mountain that turned into an umbrella, and the saddhu who (with comic results) invoked the God before dining. All culminated in the dance of the milkmaidens before Krishna, and in the still greater dance of Krishna before the milkmaidens, when the music and the musicians swirled through the dark blue robes of the actors into their tinsel crowns, and all became one. The Rajah and his guests would then forget that this was a dramatic performance, and would worship the actors. Nothing of the sort could occur to-day, because death interrupts. It interrupted less here than in Europe, its pathos was less poignant, its irony less cruel. There were two claimants to the throne, unfortunately, who were in the palace now and suspected what had happened, yet they made no trouble, because religion is a living force to the Hindus, and can at certain moments fling down everything that is petty and temporary in their natures. The festival flowed on, wild and sincere, and all men loved each other, and avoided by instinct whatever could cause inconvenience or pain. Aziz could not understand this, any more than an average Christian could. He was puzzled that Mau should suddenly be purged from suspicion and self-seeking. Although he was an outsider, and excluded from their rites, they were always particularly charming to him at this time; he and his household received small courtesies and presents, just because he was outside. He had nothing to do all day, except to send the embrocation over to the Guest House, and towards sunset he remembered it, and looked round his house for a local palliative, for the dispensary was shut. He found a tin of ointment belonging to Mohammed Latif, who was unwilling it should be removed, for magic words had been spoken over it while it was being boiled down, but Aziz promised that he would bring it back after application to the stings: he wanted an excuse for a ride. The procession was beginning to form as he passed the palace. A large crowd watched the loading of the State palanquin, the prow of which protruded in the form of a silver dragon's head through the lofty half-opened door. Gods, big and little, were getting aboard. He averted his eyes, for he never knew how much he was supposed to see, and nearly collided with the Minister of Education. "Ah, you might make me late"--meaning that the touch of a

non-Hindu would necessitate another bath; the words were spoken without moral heat. "Sorry," said Aziz. The other smiled, and again mentioned the Guest House party, and when he heard that Fielding's wife was not Miss Quested after all, remarked "Ah, no, he married the sister of Mr. Heaslop. Ah, exactly, I have known that for over a year"--also without heat. "Why did you not tell me? Your silence plunged me into a pretty pickle." Godbole, who had never been known to tell anyone anything, smiled again, and said in deprecating tones: "Never be angry with me. I am, as far as my limitations permit, your true friend; besides, it is my holy festival." Aziz always felt like a baby in that strange presence, a baby who unexpectedly receives a toy. He smiled also, and turned his horse into a lane, for the crush increased. The Sweepers' Band was arriving. Playing on sieves and other emblems of their profession, they marched straight at the gate of the palace with the air of a victorious army. All other music was silent, for this was ritually the moment of the Despised and Rejected; the God could not issue from his temple until the unclean Sweepers played their tune, they were the spot of filth without which the spirit cannot cohere. For an instant the scene was magnificent. The doors were thrown open, and the whole court was seen inside, barefoot and dressed in white robes; in the fairway stood the Ark of the Lord, covered with cloth of gold and flanked by peacock fans and by stiff circular banners of crimson. It was full to the brim with statuettes and flowers. As it rose from the earth on the shoulders of its bearers, the friendly sun of the monsoons shone forth and flooded the world with colour, so that the yellow tigers painted on the palace walls seemed to spring, and pink and green skeins of cloud to link up the upper sky. The palanquin moved. . . . The lane was full of State elephants, who would follow it, their howdahs empty out of humility. Aziz did not pay attention to these sanctities, for they had no connection with his own; he felt bored, slightly cynical, like his own dear Emperor Babur, who came down from the north and found in Hindustan no good fruit, no fresh water or witty conversation, not even a friend. The lane led quickly out of the town on to high rocks and jungle. Here he drew rein and examined the great Mau tank, which lay exposed beneath him to its remotest curve. Reflecting the evening clouds, it filled the netherworld with an equal splendour, so that earth and sky leant toward one another, about to clash in ecstasy. He spat, cynical again, more cynical than before. For in the centre of the burnished circle a small black blot was advancing--the Guest House boat. Those English had improvised something to take the place of oars, and were proceeding in their work of patrolling India. The sight endeared the Hindus by comparison, and looking back at the milk-white hump of the palace, he hoped that they would enjoy carrying their idol about, for at all events it did not pry into other people's lives. This pose of "seeing India" which had seduced him to Miss Quested at Chandrapore was only a form of ruling India; no sympathy lay behind it; he knew exactly what was going on in the boat as the party gazed at the steps down which the image would presently descend, and debated how near they might row without getting into trouble officially. He did not give up his ride, for there would be servants at the Guest House whom he could question; a little information never comes amiss. He took the path by the sombre promontory that contained the royal tombs. Like the palace, they were of snowy stucco, and gleamed by their internal light, but their radiance grew ghostly under approaching night. The promontory was covered with lofty trees, and the fruit-bats were unhooking from the boughs and making kissing sounds as they grazed the surface of the tank; hanging upside down all the day, they had grown thirsty. The signs of the contented Indian evening multiplied; frogs on all sides, cow-dung burning eternally; a flock of belated hornbills overhead, looking like winged skeletons as they flapped across the gloaming. There was death in the air, but not sadness; a compromise had been made between destiny and desire, and even the heart of man acquiesced. The European Guest House stood two hundred feet above the water, on the crest of a rocky and wooded spur that jutted from the jungle. By the time Aziz arrived, the water had paled to a film of mauve-grey, and the boat vanished entirely. A sentry slept in the Guest House porch, lamps burned in the cruciform of the deserted rooms. He went from one room to another, inquisitive, and malicious. Two letters lying on the piano rewarded him, and he pounced and read them promptly. He was not ashamed to do this. The sanctity of private correspondence has never been ratified by the East. Moreover, Mr. McBryde had read all his letters in the past, and spread their contents. One letter--the more interesting of the two--was from Heaslop to Fielding. It threw light on the mentality of his former friend, and it hardened him further against him. Much of it was about Ralph Moore, who appeared to be almost an imbecile. "Hand on my brother whenever suits you. I write to you because he is sure to make a bad bunderbust." Then: "I quite agree--life is too short to cherish grievances, also I'm relieved you feel able to come into line with the Oppressors of India to some extent. We need all the support we can get. I hope that next time Stella comes my way she will bring you with her, when I will make you as comfortable as a bachelor can--it's certainly time we met. My sister's marriage to you coming after my mother's death and my own difficulties did upset me, and I was unreasonable. It is about time we made it up properly, as you say--let us leave it at faults on both sides. Glad about your son and heir. When next any of you write to Adela, do give her some sort of message from me, for I should like to make my peace with her too. You are lucky to be out of British India at the present moment. Incident after incident, all due to propaganda, but we can't lay our hands on the connecting thread. The longer one lives here, the more certain one gets that everything hangs together. My personal opinion is, it's the Jews." Thus far the red-nosed boy. Aziz was distracted for a moment by blurred sounds coming from over the water; the procession was under way. The second letter was from Miss Quested to Mrs. Fielding. It contained one or two interesting touches. The writer hoped that "Ralph will enjoy his India more than I did mine," and appeared to have given him money for this purpose-- "my debt which I shall never repay in person." What debt did Miss Quested

imagine she owed the country? He did not relish the phrase. Talk of Ralph's health. It was all "Stella and Ralph," even "Cyril" and "Ronny"--all so friendly and sensible, and written in a spirit he could not command. He envied the easy intercourse that is only possible in a nation whose women are free. These five people were making up their little difficulties, and closing their broken ranks against the alien. Even Heaslop was coming in. Hence the strength of England, and in a spurt of temper he hit the piano, and since the notes had swollen and stuck together in groups of threes, he produced a remarkable noise. "Oh, oh, who is that?" said a nervous and respectful voice; he could not remember where he had heard its tones before. Something moved in the twilight of an adjoining room. He replied, "State doctor, ridden over to enquire, very little English," slipped the letters into his pocket, and to show that he had free entry to the Guest House, struck the piano again. Ralph Moore came into the light. What a strange-looking youth, tall, prematurely aged, the big blue eyes faded with anxiety, the hair impoverished and tousled! Not a type that is often exported imperially. The doctor in Aziz thought, "Born of too old a mother," the poet found him rather beautiful. "I was unable to call earlier owing to pressure of work. How are the celebrated bee-stings?" he asked patronizingly. "I--I was resting, they thought I had better; they throb rather." His timidity and evident "newness" had complicated effects on the malcontent. Speaking threateningly, he said, "Come here, please, allow me to look." They were practically alone, and he could treat the patient as Callendar had treated Nureddin. "You said this morning--" "The best of doctors make mistakes. Come here, please, for the diagnosis under the lamp. I am pressed for time." "Aough--" "What is the matter, pray?" "Your hands are unkind." He started and glanced down at them. The extiaordinary youth was right, and he put them behind his back before replying with outward anger: "What the devil have my hands to do with you? This is a most strange remark. I am a qualified doctor, who will not hurt you." "I don't mind pain, there is no pain." "No pain?" "Not really." "Excellent news," sneered Aziz. "But there is cruelty." "I have brought you some salve, but how to put it on in your present nervous state becomes a problem," he continued, after a pause. "Please leave it with me." "Certainly not. It returns to my dispensary at once." He stretched forward, and the other retreated to the farther side of a table. "Now, do you want me to treat your stings, or do you prefer an English doctor? There is one at Asirgarh. Asirgarh is forty miles away, and the Ringnod dam broken. Now you see how you are placed. I think I had better see Mr. Fielding about you; this is really great nonsense, your present behaviour." "They are out in a boat," he replied, glancing about him for support. Aziz feigned intense surprise. "They have not gone in the direction of Mau, I hope. On a night like this the people become most fanatical." And, as if to confirm him, there was a sob, as though the lips of a giant had parted; the procession was approaching the Jail. "You should not treat us like this," he challenged, and this time Aziz was checked, for the voice, though frightened, was not weak. "Like what?" "Dr. Aziz, we have done you no harm." "Aha, you know my name, I see. Yes, I am Aziz. No, of course your great friend Miss Quested did me no harm at the Marabar." Drowning his last words, all the guns of the State went off. A rocket from the Jail garden gave the signal. The prisoner had been released, and was kissing the feet of the singers. Rose-leaves fall from the houses, sacred spices and coco-nut are brought forth. . . . It was the half-way moment; the God had extended His temple, and paused exultantly. Mixed and confused in their passage, the rumours of salvation entered the Guest House. They were startled and moved on to the porch, drawn by the sudden illumination. The bronze gun up on the fort kept flashing, the town was a blur of light, in which the houses seemed dancing, and the palace waving little wings. The water below, the hills and sky above, were not involved as yet; there was still only a little light and song struggling among the shapeless lumps of the universe. The song became audible through much repetition; the choir was repeating and inverting the names of deities.

"Radhakrishna Radhakrishna, Radhakrishna Radhakrishna, Krishnaradha Radhakrishna, Radhakrishna Radhakrishna,"

they sang, and woke the sleeping sentry in the Guest House; he leant upon his iron-tipped spear. "I must go back now, good night," said Aziz, and held out his hand, completely forgetting that they were not friends, and focusing his heart on somethiiig more distant than the caves, something beautiful. His hand was taken, and then he remembered how detestable he had been, and said gently, "Don't you think me unkind any more?" "No." "How can you tell, you strange fellow?" "Not difficult, the one thing I always know." "Can you always tell whether a stranger is your friend?" "Yes." "Then you are an Oriental." He unclasped as he spoke, with a little shudder. Those words--he had said them to Mrs. Moore in the mosque in the beginning of the cycle, from which, after so much suffering, he had got free. Never be friends with the English! Mosque, caves, mosque, caves. And here he was starting again. He handed the magic ointment to him. "Take this, think of me when you use it. I shall never want it back. I must give you one little present, and it is all I have got; you are Mrs. Moore's son." "I am that," he murmured to himself; and a part of Aziz' mind that had been hidden seemed to move and force its way to the top. "But you are Heaslop's brother also, and alas, the two nations cannot be friends." "I know. Not yet." "Did your mother speak to you about me?" "Yes." And with a swerve of voice and body that Aziz did not follow he added, "In her letters, in her letters. She loved you." "Yes, your mother was my best friend in all the world." He was silent, puzzled by his own great gratitude. What did this eternal goodness of Mrs. Moore amount to? To nothing, if brought to the test of thought. She had not borne witness in his favour, nor visited him in the prison, yet she had stolen to the depths of his heart, and he always adored

her. "This is our monsoon, the best weather," he said, while the lights of the procession waved as though embroidered on an agitated curtain. "How I wish she could have seen them, our rains. Now is the time when all things are happy, young and old. They are happy out there with their savage noise, though we cannot follow them; the tanks are all full so they dance, and this is India. I wish you were not with officials, then I would show you my country, but I cannot. Perhaps I will just take you out on the water now, for one short half-hour." Was the cycle beginning again? His heart was too full to draw back. He must slip out in the darkness, and do this one act of homage to Mrs. Moore's son. He knew where the oars were--hidden to deter the visitors from going out--and he brought the second pair, in case they met the other boat; the Fieldings had pushed themselves out with long poles, and might get into difficulties, for the wind was rising. Once on the water, he became easy. One kind action was with him always a channel for another, and soon the torrent of his hospitality gushed forth and he began doing the honours of Mau and persuading himself that he understood the wild procession, which increased in lights and sounds as the complications of its ritual developed. There was little need to row, for the freshening gale blew them in the direction they desired. Thorns scratched the keel, they ran into an islet and startled some cranes. The strange temporary life of the August flood-water bore them up and seemed as though it would last for ever. The boat was a rudderless dinghy. Huddled up in the stern, with the spare pair of oars in his arms, the guest asked no questions about details. There was presently a flash of lightning, followed by a second flash--little red scratches on the ponderous sky. "Was that the Rajah?" he asked. "What--what do you mean?" "Row back." "But there's no Rajah--nothing----" "Row back, you will see what I mean." Aziz found it hard work against the advancing wind. But he fixed his eyes on the pin of light that marked the Guest House and backed a few strokes. "There . . ." Floating in the darkness was a king, who sat under a canopy, in shining royal robes. . . . "I can't tell you what that is, I'm sure," he whispered. "His Highness is dead. I think we should go back at once." They were close to the promontory of the tombs, and had looked straight into the chhatri of the Rajah's father through an opening in the trees. That was the explanation. He had heard of the image--made to imitate life at enormous expense--but he had never chanced to see it before, though he frequently rowed on the lake. There was only one spot from which it could be seen, and Ralph had directed him to it. Hastily he pulled away, feeling that his companion was not so much a visitor as a guide. He remarked, "Shall we go back now?" "There is still the procession." "I'd rather not go nearer--they have such strange customs, and might hurt you." "A little nearer." Aziz obeyed. He knew with his heart that this was Mrs. Moore's son, and indeed until his heart was involved he knew nothing. "Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Krishnaradha," went the chant, then suddenly changed, and in the interstice he heard, almost certainly, the syllables of salvation that had sounded during his trial at Chandrapore. "Mr. Moore, don't tell anyone that the Rajah is dead. It is a secret still, I am supposed not to say. We pretend he is alive until after the festival, to prevent unhappiness. Do you want to go still nearer?" "Yes." He tried to keep the boat out of the glare of the torches that began to star the other shore. Rockets kept going off, also the guns. Suddenly, closer than he had calculated, the palanquin of Krishna appeared from behind a ruined wall, and descended the carven glistening watersteps. On either side of it the singers tumbled, a woman prominent, a wild and beautiful young saint with flowers in her hair. She was praising God without attributes-- thus did she apprehend Him. Others praised Him without attributes, seeing Him in this or that organ of the body or manifestation of the sky. Down they rushed to the foreshore and stood in the small waves, and a sacred meal was prepared, of which those who felt worthy partook. Old Godbole detected the boat, which was drifting in on the gale, and he waved his arms--whether in wrath or joy Aziz never discovered. Above stood the secular power of Mau--elephants, artillery, crowds--and high above them a wild tempest started, confined at first to the upper regions of the air. Gusts of wind mixed darkness and light, sheets of rain cut from the north, stopped, cut from the south, began rising from below, and across them struggled the singers, sounding every note but terror, and preparing to throw God away, God Himself, (not that God can be thrown) into the storm. Thus was He thrown year after year, and were others thrown--little images of Ganpati, baskets of ten-day corn, tiny tazias after Mohurram--scapegoats, husks, emblems of passage; a passage not easy, not now, not here, not to be apprehended except when it is unattainable: the God to be thrown was an emblem of that. The village of Gokul reappeared upon its tray. It was the substitute for the silver image, which never left its haze of flowers; on behalf of another symbol, it was to perish. A servitor took it in his hands, and tore off the blue and white streamers. He was naked, broad-shouldered, thin-waisted--the Indian body again triumphant-- and it was his hereditary office to close the gates of salvation. He entered the dark waters, pushing the village before him, until the clay dolls slipped off their chairs and began to gutter in the rain, and King Kansa was confounded with the father and mother of the Lord. Dark and solid, the little waves sipped, then a great wave washed and then English voices cried "Take care!" The boats had collided with each other. The four outsiders flung out their arms and grappled, and, with oars and poles sticking out, revolved like a mythical monster in the whirlwind. The worshippers howled with wrath or joy, as they drifted forward helplessly against the servitor. Who awaited them, his beautiful dark face expressionless, and as the last morsels melted on his tray, it struck them. The shock was minute, but Stella, nearest to it, shrank into her husband's arms, then reached forward, then flung herself against Aziz, and her motions capsized them. They plunged into the warm, shallow water, and rose struggling into a tornado of noise. The oars, the sacred tray, the letters of Ronny and Adela, broke loose and floated confusedly. Artillery was fired, drums beaten, the elephants trumpeted, and drowning all an immense peal of thunder, unaccompanied by

lightning, cracked like a mallet on the dome. That was the climax, as far as India admits of one. The rain settled in steadily to its job of wetting everybody and everything through, and soon spoiled the cloth of gold on the palanquin and the costly disc-shaped banners. Some of the torches went out, fireworks didn't catch, there began to be less singing, and the tray returned to Professor Godbole, who picked up a fragment of the mud adhering and smeared it on his forehead without much ceremony. Whatever had happened had happened, and while the intruders picked themselves up, the crowds of Hindus began a desultory move back into the town. The image went back too, and on the following day underwent a private death of its own, when some curtains of magenta and green were lowered in front of the dynastic shrine. The singing went on even longer . . . ragged edges of religion . . . unsatisfactory and undramatic tangles. . . . "God si love." Looking back at the great blur of the last twenty-four hours, no man could say where was the emotional centre of it, any more than he could locate the heart of a cloud.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Friends again, yet aware that they could meet no more, Aziz and Fielding went for their last ride in the Mau jungles. The floods had abated and the Rajah was officially dead, so the Guest House party were departing next morning, as decorum required. What with the mourning and the festival, the visit was a failure. Fielding had scarcely seen Godbole, who promised every day to show him over the King-Emperor George Fifth High School, his main objective, but always made some excuse. This afternoon Aziz let out what had happened: the King-Emperor had been converted into a granary, and the Minister of Education did not like to admit this to his former Principal. The school had been opened only last year by the Agent to the Governor-General, and it still flourished on paper; he hoped to start it again before ts absence was remarked and to collect its scholars before they produced children of their own. Fielding laughed at the tangle and waste of energy, but he did not travel as lightly as in the past; education was a continuous concern to him, because his income and the comfort of his family depended on it. He knew that few Indians think education good in itself, and he deplored this now on the widest grounds. He began to say something heavy on the subject of Native States, but the friendliness of Aziz distracted him. This reconciliation was a success, anyhow. After the funny shipwreck there had been no more nonsense or bitterness, and they went back laughingly to their old relationship as if nothing had happened. Now they rode between jolly bushes and rocks. Presently the ground opened into full sunlight and they saw a grassy slope bright with butterflies, also a cobra, which crawled across doing nothing in particular, and disappeared among some custard apple trees. There were round white clouds in the sky, and white pools on the earth; the hills in the distance were purple. The scene was as park-like as England, but did not cease being queer. They drew rein, to give the cobra elbow-room, and Aziz produced a letter that he wanted to send to Miss Quested. A charming letter. He wanted to thank his old enemy for her fine behaviour two years back: perfectly plain was it now that she had behaved well. "As I fell into our largest Mau tank under circumstances our other friends will relate, I thought how brave Miss Quested was and decided to tell her so, despite my imperfect English. Through you I am happy here with my children instead of in a prison, of that I make no doubt. My children shall be taught to speak of you with the greatest affection and respect." "Miss Quested will be greatly pleased. I am glad you have seen her courage at last." "I want to do kind actions all round and wipe out the wretched business of the Marabar for ever. I have been so disgracefully hasty, thinking you meant to get hold of my money: as bad a mistake as the cave itself." "Aziz, I wish you would talk to my wife. She too believes that the Marabar is wiped out." "How so?" "I don't know, perhaps she might tell you, she won't tell me. She has ideas I don't share--indeed, when I'm away from her I think them ridiculous. When I'm with her, I suppose because I'm fond of her, I feel different, I feel half dead and half blind. My wife's after something. You and I and Miss Quested are, roughly speaking, not after anything. We jog on as decently as we can, you a little in front--a laudable little party. But my wife is not with us." "What are you meaning? Is Stella not faithful to you, Cyril? This fills me with great concern." Fielding hesitated. He was not quite happy about his marriage. He was passionate physically again--the final flare-up before the clinkers of middle age--and he knew that his wife did not love him as much as he loved her, and he was ashamed of pestering her. But during the visit to Mau the situation had improved. There seemed a link between them at last--that link outside either participant that is necessary to every relationship. In the language of theology, their union had been blessed. He could assure Aziz that Stella was not only faithful to him, but likely to become more so; and trying to express what was not clear to himself, he added dully that different people had different points of view. "If you won't talk about the Marabar to Stella, why won't you talk to Ralph? He is a wise boy really. And (same metaphor) he rides a little behind her, though with her." "Tell him also, I have nothing to say to him, but he is indeed a wise boy and has always one Indian friend. I partly love him because he brought me back to you to say good-bye. For this is good-bye, Cyril, though to think about it will spoil our ride and make us sad." "No, we won't think about it." He too felt that this was their last free intercourse. All the stupid misunderstandings had been cleared up, but socially they had no meeting-place. He had thrown in his lot with Anglo-India by marrying a countrywoman, and he was acquiring some of its limitations, and already felt surprise at his own past heroism. Would he to-day defy all his own people for the sake of a stray Indian? Aziz was a memento, a trophy, they were proud of each other, yet they must inevitably part. And, anxious to make what he could of this last afternoon, he forced himself to speak

intimately about his wife, the person most dear to him. He said: "From her point of view, Man has been a success. It calmed her--both of them suffer from restlessness. She found something soothing, some solution of her queer troubles here." After a silence--myriads of kisses around them as the earth drew the water in-- he continued: "Do you know anything about this Krishna business?" "My dear chap, officially they call it Gokul Ashtami. All the States offices are closed, but how else should it concern you and me?" "Gokul is the village where Krishna was born--well, more or less born, for there's the same hovering between it and another village as between Bethlehem and Nazareth. What I want to discover is its spiritual side, if it has one." "It is useless discussing Hindus with me. Living with them teaches me no more. When I think I annoy them, I do not. When I think I don't annoy them, I do. Perhaps they will sack me for tumbling on to their dolls' house; on the other hand, perhaps they will double my salary. Time will prove. Why so curious about them?" "It's difficult to explain. I never really understood or liked them, except an occasional scrap of Godbole. Does the old fellow still say 'Come, come?'" "Oh, presumably." Fielding sighed, opened his lips, shut them, then said with a little laugh, "I can't explain, because it isn't in words at all, but why do my wife and her brother like Hinduism, though they take no interest in its forms? They won't talk to me about this. They know I think a certain side of their lives is a mistake, and are shy. That's why I wish you would talk to them, for at all events you're Oriental." Aziz refused to reply. He didn't want to meet Stella and Ralph again, knew they didn't want to meet him, was incurious about their secrets, and felt good old Cyril to be a bit clumsy. Something--not a sight, but a sound--flitted past him, and caused him to re-read his letter to Miss Quested. Hadn't he wanted to say something else to her? Taking out his pen, he added: "For my own part, I shall henceforth connect you with the name that is very sacred in my mind, namely, Mrs. Moore." When he had finished, the mirror of the scenery was shattered, the meadow disintegrated into butterflies. A poem about Mecca--the Caaba of Union--the thornbushes where pilgrims die before they have seen the Friend--they flitted next; he thought of his wife; and then the whole semi-mystic, semi-sensuous overturn, so characteristic of his spiritual life, came to end like a landslip and rested in its due place, and he found himself riding in the jungle with his dear Cyril. "Oh, shut up," he said. "Don't spoil our last hour with foolish questions. Leave Krishna alone, and talk about something sensible." They did. All the way back to Mau they wrangled about politics. Each had hardened since Chandrapore, and a good knock about proved enjoyable. They trusted each other, although they were going to part, perhaps because they were going to part. Fielding had "no further use for politeness," he said, meaning that the British Empire really can't be abolished because it's rude. Aziz retorted, "Very well, and we have no use for you," and glared at him with abstract hate. Fielding said: "Away from us, Indians go to seed at once. Look at the King Emperor High School! Look at you, forgetting your medicine and going back to charms. Look at your poems."--" Jolly good poems, I'm getting published Bombay side."--" Yes, and what do they say? Free our women and India will be free. Try it, my lad. Free your own lady in the first place, and see who'll wash Ahmed, Karim and Jemila's faces. A nice situation!" Aziz grew more excited. He rose in his stirrups and pulled at his horse's head in the hope it would rear. Then he should feel in a battle. He cried: "Clear out, all you Turtons and Burtons. We wanted to know you ten years back--now it's too late. If we see you and sit on your committees, it's for political reasons, don't you make any mistake." His horse did rear. "Clear out, clear out, I say. Why are we put to so much suffering? We used to blame you, now we blame ourselves, we grow wiser. Until England is in difficulties we keep silent, but in the next European war--aha, aha! Then is our time." He paused, and the scenery, though it smiled, fell like a gravestone on any human hope. They cantered past a temple to Hanuman--God so loved the world that he took monkey's flesh upon him--and past a Saivite temple, which invited to lust, but under the semblance of eternity, its obscenities bearing no relation to those of our flesh and blood. They splashed through butterflies and frogs; great trees with leaves like plates rose among the brushwood. The divisions of daily life were returning, the shrine had almost shut. "Who do you want instead of the English? The Japanese?" jeered Fielding, drawing rein. "No, the Afghans. My own ancestors." "Oh, your Hindu friends will like that, won't they?" "It will be arranged--a conference of Oriental statesmen." "It will indeed be arranged." "Old story of 'We will rob every man and rape every woman from Peshawar to Calcutta,' I suppose, which you get some nobody to repeat and then quote every week in the _Pioneer_ in order to frighten us into retaining you! We know!" Still he couldn't quite fit in Afghans at Mau, and, finding he was in a corner, made his horse rear again until he remembered that he had, or ought to have, a mother-land. Then he shouted: "India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one! Hurrah! Hurrah for India! Hurrah! Hurrah!" India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last corner to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps! Fielding mocked again. And Aziz in an awful rage danced this way and that, not knowing what to do, and cried: "Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahrned will, Karim will, if it's fifty-five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then "--he rode against him furiously--"and then," he concluded, half kissing him, "you and I shall be friends." "Why can't we be friends now?" said the other, holding him affectionately. "It's what I want. It's what you want." But the horses didn't want it--they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, "No, not yet,"

and the sky said, "No, not there."

WEYBRIDGE, 1924.

E.M. FORSTER

PASAJE A LA INDIA

ePUB

La importancia y sentido de *Pasaje a la India*, considerada de forma casi unánime la obra cumbre de su autor, no se reducen en modo alguno a la simple denuncia de los estragos causados por el imperialismo británico en el subcontinente indio, sino que E. M. Forster lleva a cabo en ella la transposición poética del enfrentamiento de dos mundos opuestos, Oriente y Occidente; de dos actitudes mentales, la intuitiva y la lógica; de dos principios reducidos a norma de conducta, la estética y el pragmatismo. Un conjunto de oposiciones aglutinado por la poesía y el humor y sobre el que planea, a lo largo de toda la novela, la imposibilidad de comunicación de dos seres unidos por la amistad o el amor.

En torno a 1920, el Imperio británico en la India vive, aún sin saberlo, su crepúsculo. Aziz es un joven médico indio de religión musulmana que mantiene buenas relaciones con los británicos pese a ser consciente y asumir la radical lejanía entre el mundo de éstos y aquel al cual él pertenece. Un confuso incidente en las singulares cuevas de Marabar que le hace objeto de una improbable acusación y el consiguiente proceso pondrán de relieve, sin embargo, el enfrentamiento entre dos mundos opuestos y dos mentalidades distintas.

Llevada al cine por David Lean en 1984, *Pasaje a la India* es, además, un retrato inolvidable de una tierra llena de sugestión y contrastes, así como del carácter de sus gentes.

E. M. Forster (1879-1970) es uno de los escritores ingleses más destacados del siglo XX. Autor ya de gran éxito en vida, vio incrementada aún más su popularidad y su fama a raíz de las adaptaciones al cine de novelas como Regreso a *Howards End*, *Una habitación con vistas* o *Maurice*

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PRIMERA PARTE

MEZQUITA

Capítulo primero

Si se exceptúan las Cuevas de Marabar —y están a veinte millas de distancia—, la ciudad de Chandrapore no tiene nada de extraordinario. Limitada, más que bañada, por el Ganges, sigue su curso por espacio de unas dos millas y apenas es posible distinguirla de los detritos que el río deposita tan generosamente. Como el Ganges no es allí sagrado, no existen escalinatas para bañarse y, en realidad, no puede hablarse de vistas sobre el río, ya que los bazares cierran por completo el amplio y cambiante panorama de su corriente. Las calles son miserables, los templos carecen de interés, y aunque existen unas cuantas casas de calidad están escondidas entre jardines o al fondo de avenidas tan sucias que sólo la persona que ha sido invitada personalmente se siente con ánimos para llegar hasta ellas. Chandrapore no ha sido nunca una ciudad hermosa o de grandes dimensiones, pero hace doscientos años estaba situada en el camino entre la Alta India —entonces imperial— y el mar, y las casas nobles datan de ese período. El gusto por la decoración se extinguió en el siglo XVIII y tampoco puede decirse que fuera siempre democrático. En los bazares no existen pinturas y las esculturas son excepcionales. La misma madera parece hecha de barro y sus habitantes son como barro en movimiento. Todo lo que se ve resulta tan insignificante y tan monótono que cuando el Ganges baja crecido cabría esperar que hiciese desaparecer esas

excrecencias que forman la ciudad, devolviéndolas a la tierra. Es cierto que algunas casas se hunden, y hay personas que se ahogan y llegan a descomponerse después *in situ*, pero la silueta de la ciudad en cuanto tal no se modifica, hinchándose un poco aquí y encogiéndose otro poco allá, como si se tratara de alguna elemental e indestructible forma de vida.

Hacia el interior la perspectiva cambia. Existe una gran explanada de forma oval y un largo hospital amarillento. Las casas que pertenecen a los euroasiáticos se hallan situadas en alto, junto a la estación de ferrocarril. Más allá de la línea férrea —que corre paralela al río— la tierra desciende para subir después, otra vez, de manera bastante abrupta. En este segundo altozano se encuentra la reducida zona residencial de los funcionarios ingleses, y visto desde aquí, Chandrapore parece un lugar completamente distinto: una ciudad de jardines, y aún más que una ciudad, un bosque —en el que apenas se distingue una cabaña de cuando en cuando— o un parque tropical bañado por un noble río. Las palmeras, las margosas, los mangos y las higueras de las pagodas, todos los árboles escondidos antes detrás de los bazares, se hacen ahora visibles y ocultan a su vez los edificios. Se alzan en jardines donde antiguos aljibes los alimentan, estallan en suburbios sofocantes y rodean templos carentes de belleza. Buscando luz y aire, y dotados de más fuerza que el hombre o sus obras, se remontan sobre el sedimento inferior para saludarse unos a otros con ramas y hojas que se hacen señas y con las que construyen una ciudad para las aves. Especialmente después de las lluvias, cubren lo que sucede debajo, pero siempre, incluso cuando están abrasados o han perdido todas las hojas, se encargan de ensalzar la ciudad para los ingleses que viven en lo alto, de manera que los recién llegados no quieren creer que sea tan mezquina como se les describe y se hace necesario pasearlos por ella para que se desilusionen. En cuanto a la zona residencial de los funcionarios, no provoca emociones. A nadie cautiva ni a nadie repele. Planeada con sentido común, tiene delante un club de ladrillos rojos y detrás una tienda de comestibles y un cementerio; los bungalows, por su parte, están colocados a lo largo de calles que se cruzan en ángulo recto.

No hay nada que sea horrible, pero sólo el panorama es hermoso; tampoco comparte nada con la ciudad, a excepción del cielo que todo lo cubre.

También el cielo tiene sus cambios, aunque menos pronunciados que los de la vegetación y el río. A veces las nubes le dan relieve, pero de ordinario es una cúpula de mezclados colores, con predominio del azul. Durante el día el azul palidece hasta convertirse en blanco allí donde toca el blanco de la tierra; al ponerse el sol esa franja adquiere una nueva tonalidad: un anaranjado que se disuelve hacia lo alto en el más suave de los morados. Pero el núcleo azul persiste, y lo mismo sucede de noche. Entonces, las estrellas cuelgan como lámparas de la inmensa bóveda. La distancia entre la tierra y los astros no es nada si se la compara con la distancia que hay detrás, y ésta, aunque más allá del color, es la última que se libra del azul.

El cielo lo determina todo: no sólo el clima y las estaciones, sino también cuándo se hermoseará la tierra, que, por sí sola, puede hacer muy poco: únicamente débiles explosiones florales. Pero si el cielo así lo decide, llueve gloria sobre los bazares de Chandraporeo hay una bendición que cruza de un lado a otro el horizonte. El cielo puede hacer esto por ser tan fuerte y tan enorme. La fuerza le viene del sol; que se la infunde diariamente; el tamaño, de la postración de la tierra. Ni una montaña quiebra la curva. Legua tras legua la tierra permanece llana, se alza un poco, vuelve a bajar. Solo al sur un grupo de puños y dedos, surgidos del suelo, interrumpen esta interminable llanura. Esos puños y dedos son las Colinas de Marabar, que contienen las extraordinarias cuevas.

Capítulo segundo

Abandonando su bicicleta, que cayó al suelo antes de que un criado pudiera sujetarla, el joven subió al porche de un salto, rebosando animación.

—Hamidullah, Hamidullah; ¿llego tarde? —exclamó.

—No te disculpes —dijo su anfitrión—. Tú siempre llegas tarde.

—Haz el favor de contestarme. ¿Llego tarde? ¿Es que Mahmoud Ali se lo ha comido todo? Si es así me iré a otro sitio. Mr. Mahmoud Ali, ¿cómo está usted?

—Gracias por su interés, doctor Aziz; me estoy muriendo.

—¿Muriéndose antes de cenar? ¡Pobre Mahmoud Ali!

—Nuestro amigo Hamidullah ya se ha muerto. Falleció en el momento en que entraba usted con su bicicleta.

—Efectivamente —dijo el otro—. Imagina que te estamos hablando desde un mundo distinto y mucho más feliz.

—¿Acaso existe una cosa llamada narguile en ese mundo vuestro mucho más feliz?

—Aziz, no digas frivolidades. Estamos hablando de cosas muy tristes.

El tabaco del narguile estaba demasiado apretado, como sucedía con frecuencia en casa de su amigo, y el agua burbujeaba malhumorada. Aziz estuvo persuadiéndolo pacientemente hasta que por fin cedió y el aroma del

tabaco se extendió a chorros por su nariz y sus pulmones, expulsando el humo de las hogueras de estiércol que los había invadido mientras el joven médico cruzaba el bazar. Era delicioso. Aziz se hundió en un trance —sensual pero sano— desde el que la conversación de los otros dos no resultaba particularmente triste: discutían si era posible o no tener amistad con un inglés. Mahmoud Ali mantenía que no, Hamidullah disentía, pero haciendo tantas salvedades que no existía desacuerdo entre elfos. Era realmente delicioso estar tumbado en el amplio porche, viendo salir la luna y oyendo detrás preparar la cena a los criados, sin tener que enfrentarse con ningún problema.

—Basta recordar lo que me ha sucedido esta misma mañana.

—Sólo afirmo que es posible en Inglaterra —replicó Hamidullah, que había estado en ese país hacía mucho tiempo, antes de la gran diáspora, y había sido cordialmente recibido en Cambridge.

—Aquí es imposible. ¡Fíjese, Aziz! El chico de la nariz encarnada ha vuelto a insultarme en el juzgado. No le culpo a él. Le habían dicho que tenía que insultarme. Hasta hace poco era un buen chico, pero los otros se han encargado de cambiarlo.

—Es verdad; aquí no tienen la menor posibilidad; eso es lo que yo digo. Llegan queriendo comportarse como caballeros, pero les dicen que no puede ser. Acuérdense de Lesley o de Blakiston; ahora es el chico de la nariz encarnada y después le llegará el turno a Fielding. Todavía recuerdo la primera aparición de Turton. Fue en otra zona de la provincia. No me creerán ustedes, pero yo he ido con Turton en su coche. ¡Nada menos que Turton! Hubo un tiempo en que éramos muy amigos. Llegó a enseñarme su colección de sellos.

—Ahora tendría miedo de que se la robaras. ¡Turton! Pero ¡ya verás como el chico de la nariz encarnada será mucho peor que Turton!

—Creo que no. Todos llegan a ser exactamente iguales, ni peores, ni mejores. Le doy dos años a cualquier inglés; me da lo mismo que se llame Turton o Burton: la diferencia es únicamente una letra. Ya las inglesas les doy seis meses. Todos son exactamente iguales. ¿No está de acuerdo conmigo?

—Yo no —replicó Mahmoud Ali, participando en aquella amarga diversión, y sintiendo al mismo tiempo dolor y regocijo con cada palabra que se pronunciaba—. Por mi parte, encuentro profundas diferencias entre quienes nos gobiernan. Nariz-encarnada masculla, Turton habla con gran claridad, Mrs. Turton acepta sobornos, Mrs. Nariz-encarnada ni los acepta ni podría hacerlo aunque quisiera, porque, de momento, no existe.

—¿Sobornos?

—¿No sabía que cuando los Turton fueron cedidos a India Central, con motivo del Proyecto del Canal, un rajá o algo parecido le regaló a Mrs. Turton una máquina de coser de oro macizo para que el agua pasara por su provincia?

—¿Y añora pasa por allí?

—No, cosa que demuestra la gran habilidad de Mrs. Turton. Cuando nosotros, pobres gentes de color, nos dejamos sobornar, hacemos lo que se quiere que hagamos, de manera que la justicia nos descubre. Los ingleses aceptan el soborno y no hacen nada. Son admirables.

—Todos los admiramos. Aziz, haz el favor de pasarme el narguile.

—Todavía no: me resulta muy agradable en este momento.

—Eres un chico muy egoísta. —Hamidullah alzó la voz de repente, pidiendo la cena. Los criados respondieron gritando que ya estaba lista. Querían decir que les gustaría que ya estuviera lista y así lo entendieron todos porque nadie se movió. Después Hamidullah continuó, pero con una actitud distinta, evidentemente emocionado—.

Fíjense en el caso del joven Hugh Bannister. Se trata del hijo de mis queridos amigos, ya muertos, el reverendo Bannister y su señora cuya bondad conmigo en Inglaterra nunca podré olvidar ni describir. Fueron como un padre y una madre para mí, y hablaba con ellos como lo estoy haciendo ahora con ustedes. Durante las vacaciones la Rectoría era mi hogar. Me confiaban a sus hijos; al pequeño Hugh lo llevaba a cuestas con frecuencia: fui con él al funeral de la reina Victoria y lo tuve en brazos, levantándolo por encima de la multitud.

—La reina Victoria era diferente —murmuró Mahmoud Ali.

—He sabido hace poco que este muchacho se dedica a los negocios y comercia con cueros en Cawnpore. Imaginen lo mucho que deseo verlo y pagarle el viaje para que esta casa pueda ser su hogar Pero sé que es inútil. Los otros anglo-indios le habrán convencido hace ya mucho tiempo. Probablemente pensará que quiero algo y yo no soportaría una cosa así del hijo de mis antiguos amigos. ¿Qué es lo que ha hecho que todo vaya mal en este país, *Vakil Sabib*? A usted se lo pregunto. Aziz intervino.

—¿Por qué hay que hablar de los ingleses? Brr… ¿Por qué hay que ser amigos o enemigos de esas gentes? Vamos a prescindir de ellos y a disfrutar nosotros. La reina Victoria y Mrs. Bannister eran las únicas excepciones y ya se han muerto.

—No, no, no estoy de acuerdo; he conocido otras.

—Yo también —dijo Mahmoud Ali, cediendo inesperadamente—. No todas las señoras son iguales.

Su actitud estaba cambiando, y recordaron pequeñas amabilidades y detalles de cortesía.

—Dijo «Muchísimas gracias» de la forma más natural.

—Me ofreció una pastilla para la tos cuando el polvo me irritaba la garganta.

Hamidullah recordaba ejemplos más importantes de socorros angélicos, pero Mahmoud Ali, que sólo conocía ingleses de la India, tuvo que escudriñar minuciosamente su memoria para encontrar algo y no es sorprendente que terminara volviendo a decir: —Pero, por supuesto, todo eso es excepcional. La excepción no confirma la regla. La inglesa media es como Mrs. Turton y ya sabe usted cómo es esa señora, Aziz.

Aziz no lo sabía, pero dijo que sí. También él generalizaba a partir de sus desilusiones; a los miembros de una raza sometida les resultaba difícil hacerlo de otra manera. Reconocidas las excepciones, estuvo de acuerdo en que todas las mujeres inglesas eran altivas y banales. La conversación perdió su brillo, aunque su fría superficie se desplegara y extendiera interminablemente. Un criado anunció la cena. Todos le ignoraron. Los dos hombres de más edad habían llegado a su tema eterno, la política, y Aziz acabó en el jardín. Los árboles despedían un dulce aroma —campacanes de

verdes floraciones— y le vinieron a la mente fragmentos de poesía persa. Cena, cena, cena…, pero cuando volvió a la casa buscándola, también Mahmoud Ali se había alejado para hablar con su *sais*.

—Ven un momento a ver a mi mujer —dijo Hamidullah, y se pasaron veinte minutos detrás del *putrdah*.

Hamidullah Begum era tía lejana de Aziz, y su único pariente femenino en Chandrapore; en esta ocasión tenía mucho que contarle sobre una circuncisión familiar que no se había celebrado con todo el esplendor debido. Resultó difícil marcharse, porque ella sólo empezaría a cenar después de que terminaran los hombres, y, por consiguiente, prolongó sus observaciones para evitar toda posible sospecha de impaciencia. Después de censurar la circuncisión, se ocupó de temas afines, y le preguntó a Aziz cuándo iba a casarse.

—Una vez es suficiente —le contestó el otro, respetuosamente, pero algo irritado.

—Ya ha cumplido con su deber —dijo Hamidullah—. No le molestes más. Saca adelante a su familia, dos chicos y una niña.

—Tía, viven muy cómodamente con la madre de mi mujer, donde ella vivía cuando murió. Los veo siempre que quiero. Todavía son unos niños muy pequeños.

—Les manda todo su sueldo, vive como un modesto oficinista y no le explica a nadie la razón. ¿Qué más quieres que haga?

Pero Hamidullah Begum no se refería a eso, y después de cambiar cortésmente de conversación durante unos instantes, volvió al tema y explicó su idea.

—¿Qué va a ser de todas nuestras hijas si los hombres se niegan a casarse? —dijo—. Tendrán que casarse mal, o…

Y empezó a contar la historia, tantas veces repetida, de una dama emparentada con la familia imperial que no encontraba marido dentro del estrecho círculo con el que su orgullo le permitía relacionarse; el resultado era que vivía soltera —cumplidos los treinta—, y que moriría soltera, porque nadie querría ya casarse con ella. Durante el tiempo que se prolongó el relato logró convencer a los dos hombres: aquella tragedia parecía un

desdoro para toda la comunidad; casi era mejor la poligamia que dejar morir a una mujer sin las alegrías que Dios le ha destinado. Matrimonio, maternidad, poder en la casa…, ¿para qué otra cosa ha nacido, y el hombre que se las niegue cómo podrá enfrentarse con el Creador en el día del juicio? Aziz se despidió diciendo: «Quizá…, pero más adelante», su invariable respuesta ante aquella petición.

—No debes retrasar lo que crees justo —dijo Hamidullah—. Esa es la razón de que la India esté en una situación tan crítica: que siempre lo dejamos todo para más adelante.

Pero al notar que su joven pariente daba la sensación de estar preocupado, añadió unas palabras tranquilizadoras, borrando así todo posible efecto de la entrevista con su mujer.

Durante su ausencia, Mahmoud Ali se había marchado en su coche dejándoles un mensaje en el que decía que sólo estaría ausente cinco minutos, pero que no esperaran por causa suya. Se sentaron a cenar con un primo lejano de la familia, Mohammed Latif, que vivía la hospitalidad de Hamidullah y ocupaba una situación ambigua, ni de criado ni de miembro de la familia con plenos derechos. Sólo hablaba si se le dirigía la palabra, y como nadie habló mantuvo un silencio que nada tenía de altivo. De cuando en cuando eructaba, como elogio a la esplendidez de la comida. Un anciano cortés, alegre y deshonesto, que no había trabajado en toda su vida. Mientras alguno de sus parientes tuviera una casa estaba seguro de disponer de un hogar, y era muy poco probable que se arruinaran todos los miembros de una familia tan numerosa. Su mujer llevaba una existencia similar a unos centenares de millas de distancia; Mohammed Latif no iba a visitarla debido al gasto que suponía el billete del tren. Aziz empezó en seguida a bromear a su costa y también a costa de los criados; luego hizo citas poéticas: en persa, en urdu y un poco en árabe. Su memoria era buena y había leído mucho para su edad; los temas que prefería eran la decadencia del Islam y la brevedad del amor. Le escucharon encantados, porque sus interlocutores veían en la poesía una actividad social, en lugar de considerarla un asunto privado como sucede en Inglaterra. Nunca se cansaban de oír palabras y más palabras; se limitaban a respirarlas junto con el frescor de la noche, sin

detenerse nunca a analizarlas; el nombre del poeta, Hafiz[1] Hadi, Iqdal, era garantía suficiente. La India —un centenar de Indias— susurraban fuera bajo la luna indiferente, pero en aquel instante la India les parecía una y exclusivamente suya, y recobraron su perdida grandeza al oír lamentar su desaparición, y volvieron a sentirse jóvenes al recordárseles que la juventud se esfuma. Un criado de ropa carmesí le interrumpió; era el *chuprasi* del Cirujano-Jefe y traía una nota para Aziz.

—Callendar quiere verme en su bungalow —dijo, sin levantarse—. Podía tener la cortesía de decir para qué.

—Algún enfermo, imagino.

—Imagino que no, imagino que para nada. Se ha enterado de las cosas materiales, colocó una mano sobre el sillín de la bicicleta, mientras un criado se ocupaba activamente de transportarla.

Entre los dos lograron que pasara sobre una tachuela. Aziz extendió las manos bajo el aguamanil, luego se las secó, se encasquetó su sombrero verde de fieltro y, con inesperada energía, salió a gran velocidad de la residencia de Hamidullah.

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—Aziz, Aziz, no seas imprudente—.

Pero ya iba bazar abajo, pedaleando furiosamente. Su bicicleta carecía de faro y de timbre, y tampoco tenía frenos, pero ¿de qué sirven esos accesorios en un país donde la única esperanza del ciclista es deslizarse de un rostro a otro, confiando en que desaparezcan un momento antes de estrellarse contra ellos? Y además la ciudad estaba casi vacía a aquella hora. Cuando se le pinchó una rueda, tuvo que apearse y llamar a gritos un *tonga*.

Al principio no apareció ninguno; luego fue preciso que se desprendiera de la bicicleta dejándola en casa de un amigo, y aún se entretuvo algo más lavándose los dientes. Pero por fin se halló traqueteando, camino de la zona residencial de los ingleses, con una intensa sensación de velocidad. Al entrar en su árida pulcritud, se sintió repentinamente deprimido. Las calles

—con nombres de generales victoriosos—, que se cruzaban en ángulo recto, simbolizaban la red que Gran Bretaña había arrojado sobre la India. Se sintió cogido entre sus mallas. Antes de llegar a la residencia del Mayor Callendar tuvo que hacer un gran esfuerzo para no apearse del *tonga* y acercarse andando al bungalow, y no porque su alma fuera servil, sino porque su sensibilidad —la parte más indefensa de su yo— temía una terrible humillación. Se había dado un «caso» el año anterior un caballero indio había llegado en un vehículo a casa de un funcionario inglés y los criados le habían hecho irse, diciéndole que se presentara de nuevo de manera más adecuada; se trataba sólo de un caso entre miles de visitas a cientos de funcionarios ingleses, pero no había tardado en saberse por todo el país. El joven Aziz temía que pudiera repetirse. Finalmente, hizo una concesión y ordenó al cochero que se detuviera en la zona de sombra, muy cerca ya del porche brillantemente iluminado.

El Cirujano-Jefe no estaba en casa.

—Pero ¿el *sahib* no ha dejado un recado para mí?

El criado le dio un escueto «No» por toda respuesta. Aziz se sintió lleno de desesperación. Era un sirviente al que había olvidado dar una propina, y ahora no podía hacer nada debido a las personas que se hallaban en el vestíbulo. Aziz estaba convencido de que existía un recado, y de que aquel hombre no se lo daba para vengarse. Mientras discutían, salieron las personas que estaban en la casa. Eran dos señoras. Aziz se quitó el sombrero. La primera, que llevaba un vestido de noche, le lanzó una ojeada y apartó instintivamente la vista.

—Mrs. Lesley, es un *tonga* —exclamó.

—¿El nuestro? —quiso saber la segunda, viendo a Aziz y repitiendo el gesto de la primera.

—En cualquier caso, aceptemos los regalos que nos envían los dioses —gritó la otra, y ambas se subieron al vehículo—. *Tonga-wallab*, al club, al club. ¿Por qué no arranca este estúpido?

—Haz lo que dicen; mañana te pagaré —le dijo Aziz al cochero y, al ponerse en marcha el *tonga*, añadió cortésmente—: Siempre a su servicio, señoras.

Ellas no le contestaron, demasiado ocupadas con sus propios asuntos. De manera que había vuelto a suceder lo mismo de siempre, como Mahmoud Ali aseguraba. El inevitable desprecio: se habían llevado su coche e ignorado su saludo. Podría haber sido peor, porque algo le confortaba que las señoras Callendar y Lesley fueran gordas y que el cochecillo se hundiera por detrás bajo su peso. Que se hubiera tratado de mujeres hermosas le habría deprimido mucho más. Aziz se volvió hacia el criado, le dio un par de rupias y le preguntó de nuevo si su amo había dejado algún recado. El otro, esta vez con mucha cortesía, respondió de la misma manera. El Mayor Callendar se había marchado en coche media hora antes.

—¿Sin decir nada?

En realidad había dicho «Maldito Aziz», palabras que el criado entendió, pero que su cortesía le impedía repetir. Tan posible es excederse en la propina como quedarse corto; de hecho, aún está por acuñar la moneda que compre la verdad exacta.

—En ese caso le dejaré una nota.

Se le ofreció el uso de la casa, pero su deseo de comportarse con gran dignidad le impidió entrar. El criado trajo papel y tinta al porche. Aziz empezó: «Estimado señor: obedeciendo su expreso mandato me he apresurado a venir como un subordinado debe…», pero en seguida se detuvo.

—Dile que he venido, eso es suficiente —explicó, rompiendo la protesta a medio formular—. Aquí está mi tarjeta. Llámame un *tonga*.

—Están todos en el club, *huzoor*.

—Entonces, telefonea a la estación para que venga uno. —Y como el hombre se disponía a obedecerle, añadió—: No hace falta, no hace falta; prefiero andar.

Luego pidió fuego y encendió un cigarrillo. Aquellas atenciones, aunque compradas, hicieron que se sintiera complacido. Durarían mientras tuviera rupias, lo que ya es algo. Pero ¡si pudiera sacudirse de los pies el polvo de la India inglesa! ¡Escapar de la red y volver a los gestos y

costumbres que conocía! Empezó a caminar, a hacer un esfuerzo desacostumbrado.

Aziz era pequeño de estatura, de complexión atlética, delicadamente proporcionado, pero muy fuerte en realidad. Andar, sin embargo, le fatigaba, como fatiga a todas las personas que viven en la India, con la excepción de los recién llegados. Hay un algo hostil en su suelo. O bien cede, y el pie se hunde en una depresión, o bien resulta inesperadamente rígido y cortante, acumulando piedras y cristales bajo cada paso, y esa sucesión de pequeñas sorpresas acaba agotando; Aziz llevaba unas zapatillas muy finas, mal calzado para cualquier país. En el límite de la zona residencial entró en una mezquita para descansar.

Siempre le había gustado aquella mezquita. Era elegante y le agradaba su distribución. El patio —al que se llegaba por una portalada en ruinas— contenía una pila para las abluciones, cuya agua transparente siempre estaba en movimiento, ya que, de hecho, formaba parte de la conducción que abastecía la ciudad. El suelo del patio era de fragmentos de losas. La parte cubierta tenía más profundidad que en otras mezquitas; daba la impresión de ser una iglesia parroquial inglesa a la que faltara uno de los lados. Desde donde estaba sentado, Aziz veía tres series de arcos, rescatados en parte a la oscuridad por una pequeña lámpara colgante y por la luna. La fachada interior —iluminada de lleno por la luz de la luna— daba la impresión de ser de mármol, y los noventa y nueve nombres de Dios esculpidos en el friso resaltaban en negro, de la misma manera que el friso destacaba en blanco contra el cielo. La oposición creada por este dualismo y el esfuerzo de las sombras por imponerse dentro de la mezquita satisfacía a Aziz, que trató de simbolizar todo el conjunto mediante alguna verdad de la religión o del amor. Cualquier mezquita que, estéticamente, le resultaba satisfactoria dejaba en libertad su imaginación. El templo de otro credo, hindú, cristiano o griego, le hubiera aburrido, sin lograr despertar su sentido de la belleza. Allí estaba el Islam, su propio país, más que una fe, más que un grito de batalla, más, mucho más… Islam, una actitud hacia la vida exquisita y duradera al mismo tiempo, donde su cuerpo y sus pensamientos encontraban un hogar. Aziz se había sentado sobre una pared baja que

limitaba el patio por el lado izquierdo. Debajo de él, el terreno iba descendiendo hacia la ciudad, visible tan sólo como una mancha de árboles, y en la quietud de la noche se oían muchos ruidos diferentes. Hacia la derecha, en el club, la comunidad inglesa contribuirá con una orquesta de aficionados. En otro sitio, algunos hindúes tocaban el tambor —sabía que eran hindúes porque el ritmo le resultaba desagradable— y otros lloraban a un muerto: sabía igualmente quiénes eran por haber firmado el certificado de defunción aquella tarde. También había búhos, el correo de Panjab… y las flores del jardín del jefe de estación, que olían deliciosamente. Pero la mezquita…, sólo ella tenía importancia en realidad y volvió a dedicarle su atención —olvidado del completo atractivo de la noche— adornándola con significados nunca imaginados por el constructor. Algún día también él edificaría una mezquita, más pequeña que aquélla, pero de un gusto exquisito, de manera que todos los que la vieran experimentaran la felicidad que sentía él en aquel momento. Y al lado, bajo una modesta cúpula, estaría su tumba, con una inscripción en persa:

Durante miles de años, ¡ay! sin que yo esté,
florecerá la rosa y volverá la primavera,
pero los que, secretamente, hayan entendido mi corazón,
se acercarán a visitar la tumba donde descanso.

Aziz había visto la cuarteta sobre la tumba de uno de los reyes del Decán y la consideraba llena de profunda filosofía: siempre le parecía que lo patético era profundo. ¡Entender secretamente el corazón! Repitió la frase con lágrimas en los ojos y mientras lo hacía uno de los pilares de la mezquita pareció estremecerse. Luego osciló en la oscuridad, separándose. Aziz llevaba en la sangre la creencia en los fantasmas, pero no se movió de su sitio. Vio agitarse otro pilar, luego un tercero y, finalmente, una inglesa quedó iluminada por la luz de la luna. Bruscamente, Aziz se sintió lleno de indignación, y empezó a gritar: —¡Señora! ¡Señora!

La mujer dejó escapar una breve exclamación de sorpresa.

—Señora; esto es una mezquita, no tiene usted derecho a estar aquí; tendría que haberse quitado los zapatos; está usted en un sitio sagrado para los musulmanes.

—Me los he quitado.

—¿De verdad?

—Los dejé a la entrada.

—En ese caso le ruego que me perdone.

Todavía sobresaltada, la mujer se acercó hacia el centro del patio, manteniendo aún entre los dos la pila de las abluciones.

—Siento mucho haber hablado —dijo Aziz.

—¿Estaba en lo cierto, no es eso? ¿Puedo entrar si me quito los zapatos, verdad?

—Por supuesto, pero muy pocas señoras se molestan en hacerlo, sobre todo si creen que nadie las ve.

—Eso da lo mismo. Dios está aquí.

—¡Señora!

—Por favor, déjeme marchar.

—¿Puedo hacer algo por usted, ahora o en cualquier otro momento?

—No, gracias, nada en absoluto…; buenas noches.

—¿Podría saber su nombre?

Ella estaba ya bajo la sombra del portal, de manera que Aziz no podía ver su rostro, pero, en cambio, la dama inglesa sí podía ver el suyo.

—Mrs. Moore —dijo, cambiando el tono de voz—. Mrs…

Al avanzar, Aziz descubrió que su interlocutora era una mujer de edad.

Una edificación más grande que la mezquita cayó hecha pedazos, y no supo si se alegraba o lo sentía. La señora, de piel rojiza y pelo blanco, era mayor que Hamidullah Begum. Su voz le había engañado.

—Mrs. Moore, temo haberla sobresaltado. Les hablaré de usted a los miembros de nuestra comunidad, a mis amigos. Que Dios está aquí… Excelente, de una gran delicadeza, no hay duda. Imagino que acaba usted de llegar a la India.

—Sí, ¿cómo lo sabe?

—Por la manera que ha tenido de hablarme. ¿Me permite al menos que le busque un coche?

—No se moleste; sólo tengo que volver al club. Están representando una obra que ya he visto en Londres y hacía mucho calor allí dentro.

—¿Cómo se llama la obra?

—La prima Kate.

—Creo que no debiera usted pasear sola de noche, Mrs. Moore. Andan por ahí tipos poco recomendables, y desde las Colinas de Marabar pueden llegar hasta aquí los leopardos. Serpientes también.

Mrs. Moore dejó escapar una exclamación; se había olvidado de las serpientes.

—Un escarabajo con seis puntos, por ejemplo —continuó Aziz—. Usted lo coge, él la pica y le produce la muerte.

—Pero usted también se pasea.

—Yo ya estoy acostumbrado.

—¿Acostumbrado a las serpientes? Rieron los dos.

—Soy médico —explicó Aziz—. Las serpientes no se atreven a morderme. —Se sentaron en la entrada, los dos juntos, para ponerse el calzado—. Por favor, ¿le puedo hacer una pregunta? ¿Por qué viene usted a la India en esta época del año, cuando termina la estación fría?

—Quería haberme puesto antes en camino, pero tuve que retrasar el viaje por causas de fuerza mayor.

—¡El clima le resultará en seguida muy poco saludable! ¿Y qué motivo puede haberla traído a Chandrapore?

—Visitar a mi hijo. Es el Magistrado Municipal.

—Perdóneme, pero es completamente imposible. Nuestro Magistrado Municipal se llama Heaslop. Le conozco muy bien.

—Es mi hijo de todas formas —dijo ella, sonriendo.

—Pero, Mrs. Moore, ¿cómo puede ser eso?

—Me casé dos veces.

—Sí, ya veo; y su primer esposo murió.

—Murió él y también el segundo.

—Entonces estamos en el mismo caso —dijo Aziz, un tanto misteriosamente—. ¿Y ahora no tiene usted más familia que el Magistrado Municipal?

—No; tengo otros dos hijos más pequeños, Ralph y Stella, que viven en Inglaterra.

—¿Y el caballero que vive aquí es el hermanastro de Ralph y de Stella?

—Exacto.

—Mrs. Moore, todo esto es muy extraño, porque, igual que usted, también yo tengo dos hijos y una hija. ¿No es el mismo caso, pero en circunstancias más difíciles?

—¿Cómo se llaman? ¿No se tratará de otros Ronny, Ralph y Stella?

La posibilidad le encantó.

—No, ciertamente. ¡Qué divertido suena! Sus nombres son muy distintos y le sorprenderán. Escuche, haga el favor. Voy a decirle los nombres de mis hijos. El primero se llama Ahmed; el segundo, Karim, y la tercera, la mayor, Jamila. Tres hijos son suficientes. ¿No está de acuerdo conmigo?

—Sí que lo estoy.

Se quedaron en silencio unos instantes, pensando en sus respectivas familias. Mrs. Moore suspiró y se levantó para irse.

—¿Le gustaría visitar el Hospital Minto una mañana? —quiso saber Aziz—. No tengo otra cosa que ofrecerle en Chandrapore.

—Gracias, ya lo he visto; de lo contrario, me hubiese gustado mucho recorrerlo con usted.

—Imagino que lo vio usted con el Cirujano-Jefe.

—Sí, con él y Mrs. Callendar.

La voz de Aziz se alteró.

—¡Ah! Una señora encantadora.

—Es posible que sea así cuando se la conoce mejor.

—¿Cómo?;No le resultó simpática?

—No hay duda de que se esforzó por mostrarse amable, pero no me pareció exactamente encantadora.

—Acaba de llevarse mi *tonga* sin pedir permiso —estalló Aziz—, ¿llama usted ser encantadora a eso? Y el Mayor Callendar interrumpe noche tras noche mis cenas con otros amigos; y cuando acudo a toda prisa, renunciando a un rato muy agradable, no le encuentro en su casa y ni siquiera me deja un recado. Dígame, se lo ruego, ¿es eso encantador? Pero ¿a quién le importa? No puedo hacer nada, y él lo sabe. No soy más que un subordinado, mí tiempo no tiene valor, el porche es un sitio suficientemente bueno para un indio; sí, sí, que se quede allí de pie, y Mrs. Callendar me quita el coche y no responde a mi saludo…

Mrs. Moore le escuchaba.

A Aziz le excitaban en parte los agravios sufridos, pero, sobre todo, ver que alguien comprendía su situación. Era esto lo que le llevó a repetirse, a exagerar, a contradecirse. Mrs. Moore había manifestado su simpatía criticando a una compatriota delante de él, pero ya antes se había dado cuenta de que no era como otras inglesas. La llama que ni siquiera la belleza misma puede alimentar estaba alzándose, y aunque sus palabras fueran quejumbrosas, su corazón empezó a abrasarse secretamente y muy pronto se le desbordó por la boca.

—Usted me entiende, usted sabe lo que siento. ¡Si los demás se parecieran a usted!

—No creo que entienda muy bien a las personas —replicó ella, bastante sorprendida—. Sólo sé si me gustan o me desagradan.

—Entonces es usted una oriental.

Mrs. Moore aceptó que la acompañara de vuelta al club, y al llegar a la entrada lamentó no ser miembro, y poder así invitarle entrar.

—A los indios no se les permite entrar en el Club de Chandrapore ni siquiera en calidad de invitados —dijo Aziz con sencillez.

Como en aquel momento se sentía feliz no se extendió en la relación de sus agravios. Mientras descendía hacia la ciudad, bajo el agradable resplandor de la luna, vio otra vez la elegante mezquita, y le pareció que él era tan poseedor de aquella tierra como el que más. ¿Qué importaba si unos cuantos hindúes más bien fofos le habían precedido allí y otros tantos ingleses de alma fría habían de sucederle?

Capítulo tercero

El tercer acto de *La prima Kate* estaba ya más que mediado cuando Mrs. Moore regresó al club. Las ventanas se hallaban completamente cerradas para evitar que los criados pudieran ver actuar a sus *mem-sabibs*, y el calor, lógicamente, era inmenso. Un ventilador eléctrico se agitaba como un pájaro herido, otro no funcionaba. Como no quería seguir viendo la obra, Mrs. Moore se dirigió a la sala de billares, donde fue recibida con un «Quiero ver la auténtica India», reincorporándose así de inmediato a su ambiente habitual. Se trataba de Adela Quested, la extraña y precavida muchacha que Ronny le había encargado traer de Inglaterra; Ronny era su hijo, también prudente, con quien Miss Quested probablemente se casaría, aunque no era del todo seguro; y ella era una señora de edad.

—También yo quiero verla, me gustaría que fuera posible. Al parecer, los Turton van a organizar algo para el martes que viene.

—Terminará siendo un paseo en elefante, como pasa siempre. Fíjese en la velada de hoy. *¡La prima Kate!* ¡Imagínese! Pero dígame dónde ha estado. ¿Ha conseguido ver la luna en el Ganges?

La noche anterior las dos señoras habían contemplado el reflejo de la luna en un lejano canal del río. El agua dilataba su imagen, de manera que parecía más grande y más brillante que la luna de verdad, cosa que les había complacido.

—Estuve en la mezquita, pero no vi la luna en el río.

—Se habrá modificado el ángulo… Hoy sale más tarde.

—Cada vez más tarde —bostezó Mrs. Moore, que se sentía cansada después del paseo—. Déjame que piense…, aquí no vemos el otro lado de la luna, claro.

—Vamos, la India no está tan mal como todo eso —dijo una voz agradable—. El otro lado del mundo, si usted quiere, pero la luna sigue siendo la misma.

Ninguna de las dos conocía a la persona que había hablado, ni volvieron a verla nunca. Se limitó a decir su frase amistosa mientras cruzaba entre pilares de ladrillos rojos antes de adentrarse en la oscuridad.

—Ni siquiera estamos viendo el otro lado del mundo; de eso nos quejamos —dijo Adela.

Mrs. Moore estuvo de acuerdo; también ella se sentía desilusionada por la monotonía de su nueva vida. Habían hecho un viaje muy romántico a través del Mediterráneo y de las arenas de Egipto hasta el puerto de Bombay para, al final, encontrar tan sólo una serie de bungalows dispuestos en forma de parrilla. Pero no se lo tomaba tan a pecho como Miss Quested: tenía cuarenta años más y había aprendido que la vida nunca nos da lo que queremos en el momento que consideramos adecuado. Las aventuras llegan, pero no puntualmente. Insistió en su esperanza de que se organizara algo interesante para el martes.

—Beban algo —dijo otra voz agradable—. Mrs. Moore… Miss Quested… Tomen una copa, dos copas.

Esta vez sabían de quién se trataba: Mr. Turton, el Administrador General, primera autoridad de la zona, con el que habían estado cenando. Al igual que ellas, había encontrado la atmósfera de *La prima Kate* demasiado cálida. Ronny, les dijo, estaba de director de escena en sustitución del Mayor Callendar —a quien un subalterno o alguien así había dejado colgado—, y lo hacía muy bien; después pasó revista a otros méritos de Ronny, y con voz tranquila y firme dijo muchas cosas halagadoras. No es que el Magistrado Municipal sobresaliera especialmente en los deportes ni por su dominio de las lenguas locales o que supiera demasiado Derecho,

pero —y, al parecer, este «pero» tenía mucha importancia— Ronny creaba una impresión de dignidad.

Mrs. Moore se sorprendió al enterarse de esto, por tratarse de una cualidad que las madres no suelen atribuir a sus hijos. A Miss Quested le produjo cierta ansiedad, porque aún no había decidido si le gustaban los hombres de aire majestuoso. De hecho, intentó discutir aquella apreciación con Mr. Turton, pero él, con un gesto de la mano lleno de buen humor, la hizo callar y siguió hablando hasta terminar lo que había venido a decir:

—Lo importante es que Heaslop es un *sabib*; es el tipo de persona que necesitamos, es uno de los nuestros.

Otro miembro del club, que estaba inclinado sobre la mesa de billar, dijo: «¡Escuchen, escuchen!» El asunto quedó, por tanto, sentenciado, sin apelación posible y el Administrador General salió de la sala, porque le reclamaban otros deberes.

Mientras tanto, terminó la representación, y la orquesta de aficionados interpretó el himno nacional. Las conversaciones y las partidas de biliar se interrumpieron y los rostros adquirieron una rígida expresión. Era el himno del Ejército de Ocupación. Les recordaba a todos los miembros del club —ellos y ellas— que eran británicos y que vivían en exilio. Creaba cierto estado emocional y reforzaba útilmente la convicción del poder de la voluntad. La mezquina melodía, las lacónicas series de peticiones a Yahveh, se fundían en una plegaria desconocida en Inglaterra, y aunque ni la realeza ni la deidad llegaban a ser para ellos realidades concretas, sí percibían un algo específico, y se sentían fortalecidos para resistir otro día más. Luego salieron todos del teatro improvisado, ofreciéndose mutuamente algo de beber.

—Adela, tómate una copa; y tú también, madre.

Las dos dijeron que no —estaban cansadas de bebidas— y Miss Quested, que decía siempre lo que pensaba, anunció de nuevo que estaba deseosa de ver la India verdadera.

Ronny se hallaba de muy buen humor. La petición se le antojó cómica, y se dirigió a otros de los que pasaban:

—¡Fielding! ¿Cómo se hace para ver la verdadera India?

—Trate de ver a los indios —contestó el interpelado, desapareciendo acto seguido.

—¿Quién era?

—El Director del Instituto.

—Como si fuera posible no verlos —suspiró Mrs. Lésiey.

—Yo lo he conseguido —dijo Miss Quested—. Con la excepción de mi propio criado, apenas he hablado con un indio desde que desembarqué.

—Ha tenido usted mucha suerte.

—Pero yo quiero conocerlos.

Miss Quested se convirtió en el centro de un grupo de señoras que la contemplaban, divertidas.

—¡Querer conocer a los indios! ¡Qué nuevo suena eso! —dijo una de ellas.

—¡Los nativos! ¡Imagínense! —comentó otra.

—Déjeme que le explique —añadió una tercera, con más seriedad—. Los nativos no nos respetan más después de conocerlos, ¿comprende?

—Eso pasa también con otras muchas personas.

Pero la otra, perfectamente estúpida y deseosa de mostrarse amable, continuó:

—Quiero decir que yo era enfermera antes de casarme y tuve que tratar mucho con ellos, así que estoy bien enterada. Sé realmente la verdad sobre los indios. Tenía un empleo muy poco adecuado para una inglesa… Era enfermera en un estado nativo. La única manera de comportarse consistía en mantener rígidamente las distancias.

—¿También con los pacientes?

—Lo mejor que se puede hacer con un nativo es dejarlo morir —dijo Mrs. Callendar.

—¿Y si fuera al cielo? —preguntó Mrs. Moore, con una sonrisa amable, pero irónica.

—Puede ir a donde quiera con tal de que no se me acerque. Me dan escalofríos.

—En realidad, he pensando más de una vez en eso que estaba usted diciendo sobre el cielo, y esa es la razón de que esté en contra de los

misioneros —dijo la señora que había sido enfermera—. Estoy a favor de los capellanes, pero completamente en contra de los misioneros. Permítame que se lo explique.

Pero el Administrador General intervino antes de que pudiera hacerlo.

—¿De verdad quiere usted conocer al Hermano Ario, Miss Quested? Eso es fácil de arreglar. No se me había ocurrido que pudiera divertirle. —Se quedó pensando un momento—. En realidad tiene usted la posibilidad de conocer todos los tipos que quiera. Elija. Yo estoy en contacto con los funcionarios del gobierno y los terratenientes, Heaslop responde por los que practican la abogacía, y si lo que prefiere es especializarse en educación, podemos recurrir a Fielding.

—Estoy cansada de ver pasar delante de mí figuras pintorescas como si se tratara de un friso —explicó la muchacha—. Era maravilloso cuando desembarcamos, pero ese encanto superficial desaparece muy pronto.

Al Administrador no le interesaban sus impresiones; su preocupación era conseguir que Miss Quested lo pasara bien. ¿Le gustaría un *Bridge Party?* Le explicó de qué se trataba: no de jugar a las cartas, sino de organizar una fiesta que sirviera de puente entre el Este y el Oeste; el término era de su invención, y todos los que lo oyeron lo encontraron divertido.

—Sólo me interesan los indios con los que se relacionan ustedes socialmente; las personas con las que tienen amistad.

—Verá: no nos relacionamos con ellos socialmente —dijo el Administrador, riendo—. Los indios están repletos de virtudes, pero nosotros no, y lo cierto es que son las once y media y demasiado tarde para analizar las razones.

—Miss Quested, ¡qué nombre! —hizo notar Mrs. Turton a su esposo mientras se alejaban en coche.

La señorita recién llegada no le resultaba simpática; le parecía descortés y caprichosa. Confiaba en que no hubiera venido para casarse con Heaslop, un muchacho tan considerado, aunque era esa la impresión que daba. Su marido estaba interiormente de acuerdo con ella, pero nunca hablaba mal de

una inglesa si podía evitarlo, y se limitó a decir que Miss Quested cometía errores, como era natural. Luego añadió:

—La India consigue mejoras maravillosas en lo que a discernimiento se refiere, sobre todo cuando hace calor; ha dado muy buenos resultados, incluso en el caso de Fielding.

Mrs. Turton cerró los ojos al oír aquel nombre, y comentó que Mr. Fielding no era *pukka*, y que lo mejor sería que se casara con Miss Quested, que tampoco era *pukka*. Luego llegaron a su bungalow, bajo y enorme, el más antiguo y el menos cómodo de toda la zona residencial, con una extensión de césped tan hundida que parecía un plato sopero; volvieron a beber —esta vez agua de cebada-y *se* acostaron. Su salida del club había marcado el final de la velada que, como todas las reuniones de ingleses en Chandrapore, tenía cierto carácter oficial. Una comunidad que dobla la rodilla ante un virrey y cree que el carácter divino que rodea a un rey puede trasplantarse ha de sentir cierta reverencia por cualquiera que represente al virrey. En Chandrapore los Turton eran pequeños dioses; pronto se retirarían a alguna villa en las afueras de un centro urbano, y morirían lejos de la gloria que ahora disfrutaban.

—Nuestro gran hombre se está portando francamente bien —comentó Ronny, muy halagado por las atenciones que habían recibido sus huéspedes —. ¿Os dais cuenta de que no ha dado nunca un *Bridge Party?* ¡Y eso después de invitarnos a cenar! Me gustaría haber organizado algo yo mismo, pero cuando conozcáis mejor a los nativos comprenderéis que al *Burra Sahib* le resulta más fácil que a mí. Le conocen, saben que no pueden engañarle; a mí en cambio me falta experiencia, comparativamente. Nadie puede empezar a pensar que conoce este país sin haber pasado veinte años en él.;Eh, madre! Aquí tienes la capa. Bien: voy a daros un ejemplo de las equivocaciones que uno comete. Poco después de llegar estuve fumando con uno de los abogados; nada más que un cigarrillo, no creáis. Luego me enteré de que mandó «soplos» por todo el bazar, anunciando lo ocurrido; a todos los pleiteantes se les dijo que «les sería más conveniente acudir al *Vakil* Mahmoud Ali: está en muy buenas relaciones con el Magistrado

Municipal». Desde entonces le ataco todo lo que puedo en los tribunales. Yo he aprendido la lección y espero que él también.

—¿Y no sería mejor que fumaras alguna vez con todos los abogados?

—Quizá, pero falta tiempo y la carne es flaca. Mucho me temo que prefiero fumar en el club, entre personas como yo.

—¿Y por qué no invitar a los abogados al club? —insistió Miss Quested.

—No está permitido.

Ronny se mostraba amable y paciente, y sin duda se daba cuenta de por qué Adela no comprendía. Él había sido como ella —venía a decir—, pero no por mucho tiempo. Saliendo al porche, llamó con voz firme en dirección a la luna. Su *sais* le respondió y, sin bajar la cabeza, ordenó que le trajeran el coche. Mrs. Moore, a quien el club había atontado, se reanimó en el exterior. Contempló la luna, cuyo resplandor manchaba de amarillo rojizo el morado del cielo colindante. En Inglaterra la luna le daba la impresión de estar muerta y de ser una cosa ajena; aquí, quedaba envuelta en el manto de la noche junto con la tierra y todas las estrellas. Un repentino sentimiento de unidad, de parentesco con los cuerpos celestes, se apoderó de la anciana, abandonándola inmediatamente, como un flujo de agua que atraviesa un depósito y deja una extraña sensación de frescor. No es que le disgustara *La prima Kate* o el himno nacional, pero su contenido había desaparecido ante otro nuevo, de la misma manera que cócteles y cigarros se habían trasmutado en flores invisibles. Cuando la mezquita, alargada y sin cúpula, brilló en una curva de la carretera, Mrs. Moore exclamó:

—Sí; he ido ahí; ahí es donde he estado.

—¿Has estado cuándo? —preguntó su hijo.

—En el entreacto.

—Pero, madre, no puedes hacer esas cosas.

—¿No puedo? —replicó ella.

—No; por lo menos en este país. Aquí no se hace. Está el peligro de las serpientes, sin ir más lejos. Salen de noche con mucha frecuencia.

—¡Ah, sí! Eso es lo que dijo el joven que estaba allí.

—Eso suena muy romántico —dijo Miss Quested, que sentía un gran afecto por Mrs. Moore y le agradaba pensar que la anciana hubiese disfrutado con su pequeña escapatoria—. ¡Se encuentra con un joven en una mezquita y ni siquiera se acuerda de contármelo!

—Te lo iba a decir, Adela, pero por alguna razón cambiamos de tema de conversación y se me olvidó. Mi memoria va de mal en peor.

—¿Era simpático?

Mrs. Moore hizo una pausa y dijo luego, con gran convicción:

—Muy simpático.

—¿Quién era? —quiso saber Ronny.

—Un médico. No me dijo su nombre.

—¿Un médico? No sé de ningún médico joven en Chandrapore. ¡Qué extraño! ¿Qué aspecto tenía?

—Más bien pequeño, con un bigotito y ojos penetrantes. Me 1 llamó cuando estaba en la parte oscura de la mezquita… acerca de 1 mi» zapatos. Esa fue la razón de que empezáramos a hablar. El temía que los llevara puestos, pero afortunadamente me había acordado de quitármelos. Me habló de sus hijos y luego volvimos andando al club. Te conoce mucho.

—Tendrías que habérmelo señalado. No consigo adivinar de | quién se trata.

—No entró en el club. Dijo que no le estaba permitido.

Fue entonces cuando se hizo la luz y Ronny exclamó:

—¡Santo cielo! ¿No estarás hablando de un mahometano? ¿Por no has dicho que habías hablado con un nativo? Estaba haciéndome un lío.

—¡Un mahometano! ¡Qué cosa tan magnífica! —exclamó Miss Quested —. Ronny, ¿no es típico de tu madre? Mientras hablamos de ver la verdadera India, ella va, la ve y luego se olvida de que la ha visto.

Pero Ronny se sentía molesto. Por la descripción de su madre había imaginado que el médico pudiera ser el joven Muggins, del otro lado del Ganges, y esa posibilidad había despertado todas las emociones del compañerismo. ¡Qué confusión tan absurda! ¿Por qué su madre no había indicado con el tono de voz que estaba hablando de un indio? Irritado y dictatorial, empezó a interrogarla. «¿Te llamó en la mezquita, no es eso?

¿Cómo? ¿Insolentemente? ¿Qué hacía él allí a esas horas de la noche? No, no es su hora de oración.» Esto último en respuesta a una sugerencia de Miss Quested, que manifestaba un vivísimo interés. «De manera que te interpeló por los zapatos. Entonces fue una insolencia. Es un viejo truco. Me gustaría que los hubieras llevado puestos.»

—Me parece que hubo descaro, pero no estoy de acuerdo en cuanto al truco —dijo Mrs. Moore—. Tenía los nervios de punta…, se lo noté en la voz. En cuanto contesté, cambió de actitud.

—No tendrías que haber contestado.

—Vamos a ver —dijo la muchacha con mentalidad lógica—, ¿no esperarías que un mahometano te contestara si le pidieras que se quitara el sombrero en la iglesia?

—Es diferente, completamente diferente; no lo entiendes.

—Ya sé que no, pero me gustaría entenderlo. ¿Quieres hacer el favor de decirme cuál es la diferencia?

Ronny preferiría que no se inmiscuyera. El caso de su madre no tenía importancia: era una mujer que viajaba por todo el mundo, una acompañante momentánea, que podía regresar a Inglaterra con cualquier impresión que le pareciera oportuna. Pero Adela, que planeaba pasar la vida en aquel país, suponía ya un problema mucho más serio; sería muy molesto que empezara con ideas equivocadas sobre el tema de los nativos. Detuvo a la yegua que tiraba del coche y dijo: —Ahí está vuestro Ganges.

Su atención se distrajo. Debajo de ellos había aparecido repentinamente un resplandor. No procedía ni del agua ni del brillo de la luna, pero se mantenía como un haz luminoso sobre la oscuridad. Ronny les dijo que era donde se estaba formando el nuevo banco de arena, y que la parte oscura más deshilachada que había encima era la arena, y que los cadáveres venían flotando en aquella dirección desde Benarés, o al menos vendrían si se lo permitieran los cocodrilos.

—No son muchos los cadáveres que llegan a Chandrapore.

—¡Cocodrilos también, qué cosa tan terrible! —murmuró su madre.

Los jóvenes se miraron y sonrieron; se divertían cuando la anciana señora sufría uno de aquellos suaves estremecimientos, y en esta ocasión

sirvió para que se restableciera la armonía entre los dos.

—¡Qué río tan terrible! ¡Qué río tan maravilloso! —continuó Mrs. Moore, dejando escapar un suspiro.

El resplandor se estaba modificando, ya fuera por el desplazamiento de la luna o de la arena; pronto habría desaparecido el brillante haz, y un anillo, también destinado a modificarse, adquiriría consistencia sobre el vacío en continuo movimiento. Las mujeres deliberaron sobre si esperarían o no a que se produjera el cambio, mientras el silencio se quebraba en retazos de desasosiego y la yegua se estremecía. En consideración hacia ella no esperaron, sino que siguieron adelante hasta llegar al bungalow del Magistrado Municipal, donde Miss Quested se acostó y Mrs. Moore mantuvo un breve diálogo con su hijo.

Ronny quería saber más cosas sobre el médico mahometano de la mezquita. Era deber suyo dar parte de cualquier persona sospechosa y probablemente se trataba de algún *hakim* desacreditado que había subido merodeando desde el bazar. Cuando su madre le explicó que era alguien relacionado con el Hospital Minto, se sintió aliviado, y dijo que debía de tratarse de Aziz, y que era una excelente persona; no había nada en contra de él, en absoluto.

—¡Aziz! ¡Qué nombre tan encantador!

—De manera que estuvisteis hablando. ¿Te dio la impresión de que estaba bien dispuesto?

—Sí, completamente, pasado el primer momento —respondió Mrs. Moore, ignorante de las implicaciones de tal pregunta.

—Quiero decir, de manera general. ¿Parecía tolerarnos… a nosotros, los brutales conquistadores, los burócratas sin corazón, todo ese tipo de cosas?

—Sí, creo que sí, excepto los Callendar; no le son nada simpáticos.

—De manera que fue eso lo que te dijo, ¿eh? Al Mayor le interesará saberlo. Me pregunto qué pretendería con esa observación.

—¡Ronny! ¿No estarás pensando en ir a contárselo al Mayor Callendar?

—Sí, naturalmente. ¡Tengo que hacerlo, de hecho!

—Pero, hijo mío…

—Si el Mayor oyera que no soy del agrado de alguno de mis subalternos nativos, yo esperaría que me lo hiciera saber.

—Pero, querido…, ¡una conversación privada!

—En la India no hay nada privado. Aziz lo sabía cuando dio su opinión, así que no debes preocuparte. Tenía algún motivo para decir lo que dijo. Personalmente creo que esa observación no era sincera.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Atacó al Mayor para impresionarte.

—No entiendo qué quieres decir, hijo mío.

—Es la nueva táctica de los nativos con una educación superior. Antes practicaban la adulación servil, pero la generación más joven cree en la necesidad de poner de manifiesto una varonil independencia. Suponen que dará mejores resultados con los miembros del Parlamento que van por ahí viajando. Pero tanto si los nativos fanfarronean como si adulan, siempre hay algo detrás de cada observación que hacen y, cuando menos, están tratando de aumentar su *izzat*; dicho más claramente, de apuntarse un tanto. Por supuesto, existen excepciones.

—Nunca juzgabas así a la gente en Inglaterra.

—La India no es Inglaterra —replicó él con bastante brusquedad.

Lo cierto es que para silenciar a su madre había estado usando frases y razonamientos tomados de otros funcionarios más antiguos, y Ronny no se sentía completamente seguro de sí mismo. Al decir «por supuesto, existen excepciones» estaba citando a Mr. Turton, mientras «aumentar su *izzat*» era del mismo Mayor Callendar. Las frases funcionaban y eran de uso corriente en el club, pero Mrs. Moore tenía una gran capacidad para distinguir entre expresiones de primera y de segunda mano, y podía insistir para que le diera ejemplos concretos.

—No puedo negar que lo que dices suena muy razonable, pero en ningún caso debes comentar con el Mayor Callendar lo que yo te he dicho sobre el doctor Aziz —se limitó a contestarle ella.

Ronny se sintió desleal hacia su casta, pero prometió lo que se le pedía, añadiendo: —A cambio, haz el favor de no hablar a Adela de Aziz.

—¿Que no le hable de él? ¿Por qué?

—Ya estamos empezando otra vez, madre. No soy capaz de explicarlo todo. No quiero que Adela se preocupe, puedes estar segura; empezará a cavilar sobre si tratamos a los nativos debidamente y todas esas tonterías.

—Pero Adela ha venido para preocuparse; ésa es exactamente la razón de que se halle aquí. Lo estuvo analizando todo en el barco. Tuvimos una conversación muy larga cuando desembarcamos en Aden. Te conoce en los ratos de ocio, como ella dice, pero no en el trabajo, y comprendió que tenía que venir y echar una ojeada alrededor, antes de decidirse…, y antes de que tú te decidieras. Es una persona muy imparcial.

—Lo sé —dijo él con tono abatido.

Al advertir la nota de ansiedad de su voz, Mrs. Moore comprendió que Ronny era todavía un niño pequeño y tenía que conseguir lo que le gustaba; prometió acatar sus deseos y se dieron un beso de buenas noches. Pero como no le había prohibido pensar en Aziz, lo estuvo haciendo al retirarse a su habitación. Reconsideró el encuentro en la mezquita a la luz de los comentarios de su hijo, para decidir cuál era la impresión correcta. Sí; era posible convertir todo en una escena muy desagradable. El médico había empezado por tratar de intimidarla, y después de decir que Mrs. Callendar era encantadora —al descubrir que pisaba terreno firme— había modificado su juicio; se había quejado de sus agravios, adoptado al mismo tiempo un aire protector con ella; había tomado doce direcciones distintas en una sola frase, mostrándose poco serio, demasiado inquisitivo y bastante vanidoso. Sí, todo ello era cierto, pero qué falso como resumen del hombre; los aspectos más esenciales de su vida quedaban destruidos.

Al ir a dejar la capa, la anciana descubrió que el extremo del colgador estaba ocupado por una pequeña avispa. Mrs. Moore se había percatado de la existencia de esta avispa, o de otras congéneres suyas, durante el día; eran distintas de las avispas inglesas, con largas patas amarillas, que llevaban colgando por debajo mientras volaban. Quizás aquélla había confundido el colgador con una rama: ningún animal indio tiene el menor sentido de los interiores. Murciélagos, ratas, pájaros e insectos tan pronto hacen sus nidos fuera como dentro de una casa; para ellos cualquier edificio no es más que otra normal expansión de la jungla eterna que,

alternativamente, produce árboles, casas, árboles. Allí estaba, aferrada al colgador, mientras en el llano los chacales aullaban sus deseos, que se mezclaban con el resonar de los tambores.

—Bonita —le dijo Mrs. Moore a la avispa, que no se despertó. Pero la voz de la anciana salió flotando de la casa a engrosar la inquietud de la noche.

Capítulo cuarto

El Administrador General cumplió su palabra. Al día siguiente envió invitaciones a numerosos caballeros indios de los alrededores, explicando que les esperaba en el jardín del Club entre las cinco y las siete del martes, y también que Mrs. Turton recibiría con mucho gusto a las damas de sus familias que estuvieran excluidas del *puraah*. Su iniciativa causó gran conmoción y fue comentada en distintas esferas.

—Se debe a las órdenes del Vicegobernador —fue la explicación de Mahmoud Ali—. Turton nunca haría esto si no le obligaran. Pero los funcionarios de más alto rango son diferentes; simpatizan con nosotros, el Virrey nos comprende mejor, quieren que se nos trate adecuadamente. Pero ¡vienen tan pocas veces y viven tan lejos! Mientras tanto…

—Es fácil ser comprensivo desde lejos —dijo un caballero anciano con barba—. Valoro más las palabras amables dichas cerca de mi oído. Mr. Turton las ha pronunciado, por la razón que sea. Él habla, nosotros escuchamos. No veo que necesitemos discutirlo más.

Y enlazó con una serie de citas del Corán.

—No todos somos tan mansos por temperamento, Nabab Bahadur, ni sabemos tanto como usted.

—El Vicegobernador puede ser muy buen amigo mío, pero no le causo problemas. «¿Qué tal está usted, Nabab Bahadur?» «Muy bien, gracias, Sir

Gilbert; ¿qué tal está usted?» Y eso es todo. Pero sí puedo ser una espina en el costado de Mr. Turton, y si me llama acepto su invitación. Vendré especialmente desde Dilkusha, aunque tenga que posponer otros asuntos.

—Se rebajará usted —dijo de repente un hombrecillo muy moreno.

Se produjo un movimiento de censura. ¿Quién era aquel advenedizo mal educado, para permitirse criticar al terrateniente mahometano más importante del distrito? Mahmoud Ali, aun compartiendo su punto de vista, se sintió obligado a manifestar su oposición.

—¡Mr. Ram Chand! —dijo, inclinándose rígidamente hacia adelante, con las manos en las caderas.

—¡Mr. Mahmoud Ali!

—Mr. Ram Chand, el Nabab Bahadur, me parece a mi, no necesita de nuestra opinión para decidir si se rebajará o no.

—Creo que no voy a rebajarme —dijo el Nabab Bahadur a Mr, Ram Chand, hablando con eran cordialidad, porque era consciente de la descortesía de su interlocutor y deseaba protegerle contra las consecuencias de su acto. Cruzó por su mente la idea de contestar, «Espero rebajarme», pero la rechazó por tratarse de la alternativa menos cortés—. No veo por qué tendríamos que rebajarnos. La invitación está redactada en un tono muy cordial.

Notando que no le era posible disminuir más las distancias sociales entre él y sus oyentes, envió a su elegante nieto, que le servía de acompañante, en busca de su coche. Cuando volvió con él, el Nabab repitió todo lo que había dicho anteriormente, aunque de manera más extensa, acabando con un «Hasta el martes, pues, caballeros, cuando espero que nos reunamos en los jardines del Club.»

Su opinión tenía gran peso. El Nabab Bahadur era un gran propietario y un filántropo; hombre benevolente y muy capaz de tomar sus propias decisiones. Disfrutaba de gran prestigio entre todas las comunidades de la provincia. Era enemigo leal, amigo sin desfallecimientos y de hospitalidad proverbial. «Da, no legues, ¿quién te lo agradecerá después de la muerte?» era su observación favorita. Consideraba una desgracia morir rico. Cuando un hombre como él estaba dispuesto a recorrer veinticinco millas en

automóvil para estrechar la mano del Administrador, la fiesta tomaba otro cariz. Porque el Nabab Bahadur no era como algunos hombres eminentes, que anuncian su asistencia y luego no aparecen en el último momento, dejando que las personas menos importantes se las arreglen como puedan. Si decía que iba a ir, iría; nunca engañaba a sus partidarios. Los caballeros a quienes había explicado los motivos de su decisión se instaron unos a otros a asistir a la fiesta, aun que íntimamente convencidos de que en aquella ocasión el Nabab Bahadur se equivocaba.

El terrateniente había hablado en una pequeña habitación, cercana a los tribunales, donde los abogados esperaban a los clientes; los clientes que esperaban a los abogados se sentaban fuera, en el polvo. Estos últimos no habían recibido una tarjeta de Mr. Turton. Y aún quedaban otros círculos más allá de éstos: personas que sólo llevaban un taparrabos, otros que ni eso siquiera, y que se pasaban la vida golpeando entre sí dos palos delante de un muñeco carmesí; humanidad que desciende imperceptiblemente de un grado a otro y se difumina más allá de donde alcanza la visión de las personas educadas, hasta que ninguna invitación terrena puede abarcarla.

Quizá todas las invitaciones deban proceder del cielo; quizá sea inútil que los hombres traten de unirse, porque al intentarlo sólo consiguen ensanchar el abismo que los separa. Al menos eso pensaban el anciano Mr. Graysford y el joven Mr. Sorley, los devotos misioneros que vivían más allá de los mataderos, viajaban siempre en tercera y nunca visitaban el Club. En la casa de nuestro Padre hay muchas moradas, enseñaban ellos, y sólo allí serán bien recibidas y consoladas las incompatibles multitudes humanas. En el porche celestial, nadie —blanco o negro— será despedido por los criados ni nadie que se acerque con un corazón amante se quedará de pie. Y ¿por qué tendría que pararse ahí la hospitalidad divina? Piénsese, con todo respeto, en los monos. ¿No habrá también un aposento para los monos? El anciano Mr. Graysford decía «No», pero el joven Mr. Sorley, más avanzado, decía «Sí»; no veía razones para que los monos no tuvieran su correspondiente participación en la felicidad eterna, y con sus amigos hindúes mantenía conversaciones llenas de comprensión acerca de ellos. ¿Y los chacales? Mr. Sorley no tenía en muy alta consideración a los chacales,

pero admitía que la misericordia de Dios, siendo infinita, podía muy bien abrazar a todos los mamíferos. ¿Y las avispas? El joven misionero empezaba a sentirse inquieto durante el descenso a las avispas y tendía a cambiar de conversación. ¿Y las naranjas, los cactos, los cristales y el barro? ¿Y las bacterias dentro de Mr. Sorley? No, no; eso era ir demasiado lejos. Tenemos que excluir a alguien de nuestra reunión o de lo contrario nos quedaremos sin nada en absoluto.

Capítulo quinto

El *Bridge Party* no fue un éxito; al menos no fue lo que Mrs Moore y Miss Quested estaban acostumbradas a considerar como una fiesta con éxito. Llegaron pronto, puesto que se daba en su honor, pero la mayoría de los invitados indios se habían presentado antes, y estaban amontonados en el lado más distante de las pistas de tenis, sin hacer nada.

—No son más que las cinco —dijo Mrs. Turton—. Mi marido llegará del despacho dentro de un momento y empezará el acto. No sé lo que tenemos que hacer. Es la primera vez que damos una fiesta como ésta en el Club. Mr. Heaslop, cuando yo esté muerta y enterrada, ¿seguirán ustedes celebrando fiestas así? No creo que se necesite otra cosa para que cualquier *Burra Sahib* chapado a la antigua se remueva inquieto en su tumba.

Ronny rió respetuosamente.

—Querías algo pintoresco y te lo hemos proporcionado —le dijo a Miss Quested—. ¿Qué te parece el Hermano Ario con casco y polainas?

Ni ella ni la madre de Ronny respondieron. Miraban con bastante tristeza al otro lado de la pista de tenis. No, no tenía nada de pintoresco; el Este, abandonando su secular magnificencia, estaba descendiendo a un valle del que ningún hombre alcanzaba a ver el otro lado.

—Lo más importante es recordar que los que están aquí no cuentan; las personas realmente importantes no vienen. ¿No es así, Mrs. Turton?

—Totalmente cierto —dijo la gran dama, recostándose en su asiento.

Estaba «reservándose», como ella lo llamaba; no para algo que pudiera suceder aquella tarde o incluso durante la semana, sino para alguna indeterminada ocasión futura, cuando apareciera un funcionario de alto rango que pusiera a prueba sus dotes de anfitriona. La mayoría de sus apariciones públicas se caracterizaban por esta actitud de reserva.

Seguro ya de su aprobación, Ronny continuó:

—Los indios instruidos no nos servirán de nada si hay un conflicto; simplemente no merece la pena ganárselos, por eso es por que no cuentan. La mayoría de las personas que veis son sediciosas en el fondo de su corazón y el resto echarían a correr chillando. El labrador ya es otra historia, y el *pathan*: a ése sí que se le puede considerar un hombre. Pero esas gentes… no os imaginéis que son la India.

Señaló a la línea oscura más allá de la pista, y aquí y allá brillaron unos quevedos o alguien arrastró los zapatos como si se dieran cuenta de que los estaba despreciando. La ropa europea había caído sobre ellos como una lepra, pocos se habían rendido incondicionalmente, pero ninguno quedaba incólume. Cuando Ronny hubo terminado de hablar se produjo un silencio a ambos lados de la pista; otras señoras se incorporaron por fin al grupo inglés, pero sus palabras parecían morir nada más pronunciadas. Sobre sus cabezas flotaban, imparciales, algunas cometas; sobre las cometas pasó el bulto de un buitre y por encima, con una imparcialidad que excedía todo lo demás, el cielo —translúcido más que de un color determinado— derramaba luz por toda su circunferencia. Y más allá del cielo, ¿no debe de haber algo que abarque todos los cielos, aún mes imparcial que ellos? Más allá de lo cual, lógicamente…

Hablaron de *La prima Kate*.

Habían tratado de reproducir en el escenario su propia actitud ante la vida, y vestirse como lo que eran en realidad: ingleses de clase media. Al año siguiente representarían *Quality Street o Los alabarderos del rey*. Con la excepción de esta incursión anual, nunca se ocupaban de la literatura. Los hombres no tenían tiempo, y las mujeres no hacían nada que no pudieran compartir con los nombres. Su ignorancia de las artes era llamativa, y no

perdían oportunidad de proclamarlo entre sí; era la actitud de los colegios privados, pero floreciendo con mucho más vigor del que cabe esperar en Inglaterra. Si los indios no eran más que un tema profesional, las artes eran mala educación, y Ronny había hecho callar a su madre cuando Mrs. Moore le preguntó por su viola; una viola era casi un desmerecimiento y, desde luego, el tipo de instrumento del que no se hablaba en público. La anciana señora advirtió lo convencional y tolerante de los actuales juicios de su hijo; cuando, anteriormente, los dos habían visto juntos *La prima Kate* en Londres, Ronny la había menospreciado; ahora fingía que se trataba de una obra de calidad, con el fin de no herir los sentimientos de nadie. El periódico local había publicado un «desagradable comentario», «algo que no podía haber escrito ningún hombre blanco», según hizo notar Mrs. Lesley. Se elogiaba la obra, por supuesto, y también la dirección de escena y la interpretación en su conjunto, pero el artículo contenía la siguiente frase: «Miss Derek, aunque daba perfectamente el físico de su personaje, carecía de la necesaria experiencia y, a veces, no recordaba sus parlamentos.» Este modesto intento de crítica sincera no había afectado a Miss Derek, que era una mujer muy dura, pero sí ofendido mortalmente a sus amistades. Miss Derek no vivía en Chandrapore. Estaba pasando dos semanas con los McBryde, responsables de la policía, y había tenido la amabilidad de cubrir un hueco del reparto en el último momento. ¡Buena impresión iba a llevarse consigo de la hospitalidad local!

—A trabajar, Mary, a trabajar —exclamó el Administrador, tocando a su mujer en el hombro con una fusta.

Mrs. Turton se puso en pie desmañadamente.

—¿Qué quieres que haga? ¡Esas mujeres *purdah*¡ Nunca imaginé que fueran a venir. ¡Cielo santo!

Un pequeño grupo de damas indias se había estado reuniendo en una tercera zona de los jardines, cerca de una rústica glorieta donde las más tímidas ya habían buscado refugio. El resto seguía de pie, de espaldas a los demás invitados y las caras muy apretadas contra una hilera de arbustos. A poca distancia se encontraban sus familiares del sexo masculino,

contemplando la arriesgada empresa. El espectáculo era significativo: una isla puesta al descubierto por el cambio de la marea, y destinada a crecer.

—Mi opinión es que deberían venir a donde estoy yo.

—Vamos, Mary, cuanto antes mejor.

—Me niego a estrechar la mano de ningún hombre, como no sea el Nabab Bahadur.

—¿Quién ha venido hasta ahora? —Mr. Turton recorrió la línea de una ojeada—. ¡Hummm¡, más o menos los que cabía esperar. Sabemos por qué está ése aquí, me parece; se trata de un contrato; y aquel otro quiere ganarse mi buena voluntad para el *muharram*; el de más allá es el astrólogo que desea saltarse el reglamento municipal sobre edificaciones; el siguiente es el *parsi*, y el otro… ¡Vaya! Aní va, derecho a nuestras malvarrosas. Tiró de la rienda izquierda pensando que era la derecha. Todo igual que siempre.

—Nunca se les debiera haber permitido entrar aquí en coche; es un pésimo precedente —dijo Mrs. Turton que, por fin, se había puesto en camino hacia la glorieta, acompañada de Mrs. Moore, Miss Quested y un terrier—. No logro entender por qué vienen. Les gusta tan poco como a nosotras. Hablen con Mrs. McBryde. Su esposo le hizo dar fiestas *purdah* hasta que ella se negó en redondo.

—Esto no es una fiesta *purdah* —corrigió Miss Quested.

—¿De veras? —fue la desdeñosa respuesta.

—Tenga la amabilidad de decirnos quiénes son estas señoras —pidió Mrs. Moore.

—De todas formas, son ustedes superiores a ellas, no lo olviden. Son ustedes superiores a todas las mujeres de la India si se exceptúa a una o dos de las *Ranis* con las que están en un plano de igualdad.

Adelantándose, estrechó la mano de las damas que formaban el grupo y pronunció unas palabras de bienvenida en urdu. Mrs. Turton había aprendido la lengua, pero sólo para hablar con sus criados, de manera que no conocía ninguna de las fórmulas de cortesía y de los verbos sólo el modo imperativo. Nada más terminar su salutación, la primera dama local se volvió hacia sus acompañantes.

—¿Era esto lo que ustedes querían?

—Por favor, diga a estas señoras que nos gustaría hablar su lengua, pero que acabamos de llegar a su país.

—Quizá nosotras hablamos un poco su idioma —dijo una de las señoras.

—¡Vaya, imagínense, nos entiende! —dijo Mrs. Turton.

—Eastbourne, Piccadilly, Hyde Park Córner —dijo otra de las señoras.

—Sí, claro; hablan inglés.

—En ese caso podemos hablar; ¡qué maravilla! —dijo Adela, iluminándosele el rostro.

—También conoce París —hizo saber uno de los espectadores.

—Cruzan París de camino, no hay duda —dijo Mrs. Turton, como si estuviera describiendo los movimientos de las aves migratorias. Su actitud se había hecho más distante al descubrir que algunas mujeres del grupo estaban occidentalizadas y podían aplicarle a ella sus propios criterios.

—La señora más baja es mi mujer, Mrs. Bhattacharya —explicó el espectador—. La señora más alta es mi hermana, Mrs. Das.

Las dos damas aludidas se ajustaron el *sari* y sonrieron. Había una curiosa inseguridad en sus gestos, como si estuvieran buscando una nueva fórmula que ni Oriente ni Occidente podían proporcionarles. Cuando su marido hablaba, Mrs. Bhattacharya le volvía la espalda, pero no parecía tener inconveniente en ver a los otros hombres. De hecho, todas las señoras se mostraban llenas de indecisión, encogiéndose y recobrando ánimos, riendo nerviosamente, haciendo gestos casi imperceptibles de disculpa y de desesperación ante cada frase que se decía, y acariciando y rehuyendo al terrier alternativamente. Miss Quested tenía ahora su deseada oportunidad; allí delante se hallaban unas indias amistosamente dispuestas y trató de hacerles hablar, pero no lo consiguió; no hizo más que luchar en vano contra unas murallas de cortesía que se limitaban a servirle de eco. Cualquier cosa que decía originaba un murmullo de disculpa, que se transformó en preocupación cuando se le cayó el pañuelo. Miss Quested trató de no hacer nada, para ver qué sucedía, pero las señoras indias tampoco hicieron nada. Mrs. Moore no consiguió mejores resultados. Mrs.

Turton se limitaba a esperarlas con expresión indiferente; "había sabido desde el principio lo absurdo que era todo aquello.

Cuando se estaban despidiendo, Mrs. Moore tuvo un impulso y, dirigiéndose a Mrs. Bhattacharya, cuyo rostro le resultaba agradable, le dijo:

—Me pregunto si tendría usted inconveniente en que fuéramos a visitarla algún día.

—¿Cuándo? —respondió ella, inclinándose graciosamente.

—Cuando sea conveniente.

—Todos los días son convenientes.

—El jueves…

—Claro que sí.

—Disfrutaremos muchísimo, será un verdadero placer. ¿Cuál es el mejor momento durante el día?

—Cualquier hora.

—Díganos la que usted prefiera. Ignoramos todo lo relativo a su país; no sabemos cuándo reciben ustedes visitas —dijo Miss Quested.

Mrs. Bhattacharya tampoco parecía saberlo. Su gesto daba a entender que desde que existían los jueves había sabido que unas señoras inglesas acudirían a visitarla en uno de ellos y que, por tanto, siempre estaba en casa ese día de la semana. Todo le agradaba, nada le sorprendía. Después añadió: —Salimos para Calcuta.

—¿Es eso cierto? —dijo Adela, sin percatarse en un primer momento de las implicaciones. Después exclamó—: Pero entonces no estará usted cuando vayamos a verla.

Mrs. Bhattacharya no intentó contradecirla. Pero su marido exclamó desde lejos: —Sí, sí; vengan ustedes el jueves.

—Pero estarán ustedes en Calcuta.

—No, no; no estaremos —Mr. Bhattacharya dijo algo muy de prisa a su esposa en bengalí—. Les esperamos el jueves.

—Jueves… —repitió su mujer como un eco.

—¿No habrán hecho una cosa tan terrible como retrasar su marcha por nosotras? —exclamó Mrs. Moore.

—No, claro que no; no somos gente así. Mr. Bhattacharya reía al hablar.

—Creo que sí lo han hecho. Por favor…, eso me angustia más de lo que soy capaz de expresar con palabras.

Todo el mundo se reía ya, pero sin dar la impresión de que nadie se hubiera equivocado. Siguió una discusión que no aclaró nada y durante la cual Mrs. Turton se retiró, sonriendo para sus adentros. El resultado de todo ello fue que las señoras inglesas irían el jueves, pero por la mañana temprano, para estropear lo menos posible los planes de sus anfitriones; Mr. Bhattacharya enviaría su coche a buscarlas, con criados para señalar el camino. ¿Sabía dónde vivían? Sí, claro que sí, Mr. Bhattacharya lo sabía todo; acto seguido rió de nuevo. Mrs. Moore y Miss Quested se alejaron entre un considerable revuelo de cumplidos y sonrisas; y otras tres señoras, que hasta entonces no habían tomado parte en la recepción, salieron a toda prisa de la glorieta, como golondrinas de delicados colores, y les hicieron un profundo *salaam*.

El Administrador General, mientras tanto, había llevado a cabo su recorrido. Hizo observaciones amistosas y unos cuantos chistes que fueron vigorosamente celebrados, pero como sabía cosas que iban en descrédito de la casi totalidad de sus huéspedes, no hizo en realidad más que cubrir las apariencias. Los que no habían defraudado tenían un problema de *bhang*, o de mujeres, o algo peor; e incluso los más recomendables querían conseguir algo de él. Mr. Turton estaba convencido de que un *Bridge Party* hacía más bien que mal, ya que de lo contrario no lo hubiese organizado, pero no se nacía ilusiones y en el momento oportuno se retiró al lado inglés del jardín. Las impresiones que dejó tras sí fueron diversas. Muchos de los huéspedes, especialmente los más humildes y menos familiarizados con las costumbres inglesas, se sintieron sinceramente agradecidos. Que un funcionario de tan alto rango les hubiera dirigido la palabra era ya una partida muy positiva en su activo. No les importó el tiempo que estuvieron en pie, o lo poco que sucedió, ni que al dar las siete en punto se les hiciera abandonar el Club. Otros también se sintieron agradecidos, pero con más discernimiento. El Nabab Bahadur, que no esperaba ningún beneficio personal ni le afectaba la especial deferencia con que se le saludaba, se sintió conmovido por la

simple amabilidad que tenía que haber inspirado aquella invitación. Sabía las dificultades que encerraba. También Hamidullah pensó que el Administrador había hecho un esfuerzo digno de elogio. Pero otros, como Mahmoud Ali, se mostraron cínicos; estaban firmemente convencidos de que a Turton le habían obligado a dar la fiesta sus superiores jerárquicos y de que se sentía todo el tiempo consumido por una rabia impotente, y lograron convencer a algunos invitados que habían tenido previamente una opinión más favorable. Sin embargo, incluso Mahmoud Ali se alegraba de haber asistido a la fiesta. Los santuarios son siempre fascinantes, sobre todo si están muy pocas veces abiertos, y le divertía observar el ritual del Club inglés para caricaturizarlo más tarde delante de sus amigos.

Después de Mr. Turton, el funcionario que cumplió mejor con su deber fue Mr. Fielding, el Director del Instituto. Sabía muy poco del distrito y menos aun de sus habitantes, de manera que su actitud era menos cínica. Atlético y jovial por temperamento, anduvo de un lado para otro, cometiendo numerosas equivocaciones que los padres de sus alumnos trataron de disimular porque era muy popular entre ellos. Cuando llegó el momento de los refrescos, no volvió junto a los demás ingleses, sino que se quemó la boca con *gram*. Habló con todo el mundo y comió todo lo que le ofrecieron. Entre otras muchas cosas que le eran completamente ajenas, se enteró de que las dos nuevas señoras inglesas habían tenido un gran éxito, y que la cortesía de que habían dado muestra al querer ser huéspedes de Mrs. Bhattacharya no sólo había complacido a la dama en cuestión, sino a todos los indios que se enteraron de ello. Mr. Fielding también se sintió complacido. Apenas conocía a las dos nuevas señoras, pero decidió contarles la alegría que habían causado con su amistosa actitud.

Encontró sola a la más joven. A través de un corte en el seto de cactos estaba mirando las distantes colinas de Marabar, que se habían ido acercando cautelosamente, como es costumbre suya a la puesta de sol; si el ocaso hubiera durado lo suficiente, habrían alcanzado la ciudad, pero, por tratarse del trópico, la puesta del sol era siempre muy rápida. Mr. Fielding le dio su información y la muchacha se mostró tan complacida y le dio las

gracias tan calurosamente que las invitó a ella y a la anciana señora a tomar el té.

—Iré con mucho gusto, y también Mrs. Moore, estoy segura.

—Le advierto que soy más bien un ermitaño.

—Eso es sin duda lo mejor que se puede ser en un sitio como éste.

—Debido a mi trabajo y demás, no voy mucho al Club.

—Ya sé, ya sé; y nosotros nunca salimos de él. Le envidio el tiempo que pasa con los indios.

—¿Le gustaría conocer a uno o dos?

—Muchísimo; es lo que más deseo. Esta fiesta de hoy ha conseguido irritarme y hacer que me sienta desgraciada. Creo que mis compatriotas que viven aquí deben de estar locos. ¡A quién se le ocurre invitar a unas personas para no tratarlas bien después! Usted y Mr. Turton, y quizá Mr. McBryde, son los únicos que se han comportado con un mínimo de cortesía. El resto hace que me sienta absolutamente avergonzada; y además todo está yendo de mal en peor.

Era cierto. Los ingleses tenían el propósito de esforzarse de manera muy especial, pero habían tropezado con el obstáculo de sus mujeres, a las que era preciso dar escolta, traer el té, tranquilizar acerca de los perros, y otras mil menudencias más. Cuando se empezó a jugar al tenis, la barrera se hizo infranqueable. Existía la esperanza de organizar algunos sets entre Este y Oeste, pero la idea se olvidó en seguida, y las pistas quedaron monopolizadas por las habituales parejas del Club. A Fielding también le molestaba aquello, pero no se lo dijo a la muchacha porque notó un algo puramente teórico en su estallido de indignación. ¿Le interesaba la música india?, quiso saber; en el instituto había un viejo profesor que cantaba.

—Eso es precisamente lo que deseábamos oír. Y ¿conoce usted al doctor Aziz?

—Lo sé todo acerca de él, pero no le conozco. ¿Le gustaría que lo invitáramos también?

—Mrs. Moore dice que es encantador.

—Muy bien, Miss Quested. ¿Le parece bien el jueves?

—Sí, desde luego; y esa misma mañana iremos a casa de la señora india. Todas las cosas agradables van a suceder el jueves.

—No voy a pedir al Magistrado Municipal que las traiga. Sé que estará ocupado a esa hora.

—Sí, Ronny tiene siempre mucho trabajo —replicó Miss Quested, contemplando las colinas.

¡Qué hermosas parecían repentinamente! Pero no podía tocarlas. Delante, como una barrera, se le presentó una visión de su vida de mujer casada. Ronny y ella pasarían por el Club todas las tardes, para ir después a casa a vestirse; frecuentarían la compañía de los Lesley, los Callendar, los Turton y los Burton; les invitarían y serían a su vez invitados, mientras la verdadera India pasaba a su lado sin que nadie se fijara en ella. El color seguiría existiendo —el desfile espectacular de pájaros en las primeras horas de la mañana, los cuerpos morenos, los turbantes blancos, los ídolos de carne escarlata o azul—, y también el movimiento mientras hubiese multitudes en el bazar y gente bañándose en los estanques. Podría contemplarlos desde su asiento en un carruaje. Pero la fuerza que se escondía tras el color y el movimiento se le escaparía aún más que ahora. Siempre vería la India como un friso, nunca como un espíritu, y Adela suponía que era un espíritu lo que Mrs. Moore había vislumbrado.

Y, efectivamente, al cabo de unos minutos Ronny, su madre y ella abandonaron el Club camino de casa, se vistieron y tuvieron como invitados a cenar a Miss Derek y a los McBryde. El menú consistió en sopa juliana con guisantes de lata duros como piedras, una mala imitación de pan europeo, un pescado lleno de espinas que se hacía pasar por lenguado, más guisantes de lata con las chuletas, bizcocho borracho con nata y frutas en conserva; como aperitivo, sardinas sobre rebanadas de pan tostado; el menú de la India inglesa. Se le podía quitar o añadir un plato según el lugar del anfitrión en el escalafón oficial; los guisantes podían estar más o menos duros, y podía variar el nombre de la compañía que importaba las sardinas y el vermut, pero la tradición seguía siendo la misma: comida para exiliados, preparada por criados que no la entendían. Adela pensó en los jóvenes —hombres y mujeres— que habían llegado a la India antes que ella, llenando

uno tras otro los barcos que hacían la travesía, para enfrentarse con la misma comida y las mismas ideas, y ser reprendidos con excelente buen humor hasta que se limitaban a hablar de los temas autorizados y pasaban, a su vez, a reprender a otros recién llegados. «Nunca llegaré a ser así», pensó, como era lógico, dada su juventud; pero sabía, sin embargo, que se enfrentaba con algo duro y al mismo tiempo insidioso, y que necesitaba contar con aliados. Tenía que reunir a su alrededor unas cuantas personas que pensaran como ella, y se sintió contenta de haber conocido a Mr. Fielding y a la señora india con apellido impronunciable. Aquello constituía ya un núcleo; se enteraría mucho mejor del suelo que pisaba en el curso de los dos días siguientes.

Miss Derek trabajaba como acompañante de una maharaní en un remoto Estado nativo. Era una mujer ingeniosa y alegre y les hizo reír a todos hablando del permiso que se había tomado porque estaba convencida de que se lo merecía, y no porque la maharaní le hubiese dicho que podía irse. Ahora tenía además intención de apoderarse del automóvil del maharajá; el vehículo había ido a una Conferencia de Jefes en Delhi y Miss Derek contaba con un plan estupendo para secuestrarlo en el empalme ferroviario cuando regresara por tren. También dijo cosas muy divertidas sobre el *Bridge Party*; de hecho, Miss Derek consideraba la península indostánica en su totalidad como una ópera cómica.

—Si no fuera capaz de ver el lado risible de estas gentes más valdría que me diera por vencida —explicó Miss Derek.

Mrs. McBryde —era ella la que había sido enfermera— no cesaba de exclamar:

—¡Ay, Nancy, qué maravilla! ¡Qué divertido es eso que cuentas! Me gustaría poder ver las cosas de esa manera. Mr. McBryde no habló mucho; parecía una persona agradable. Después de que se marcharan los invitados y de que Adela se fuera a la cama, madre e hijo celebraron otra entrevista. Ronny quería contar con el apoyo y los consejos de Mrs. Moore, sin dejar por ello de irritarse ante cualquier intromisión que considerase injustificada.

—¿Adela habla mucho contigo? —empezó—. Tengo tanto trabajo que no la veo todo lo que quisiera, pero espero que se encuentre a gusto.

—Adela y yo hablamos sobre todo acerca de la India. Y ya que lo mencionas, querido, creo que estás en lo cierto; tendrías que pasar más tiempo a solas con ella.

—Quizá sí; pero en seguida empezarían las habladurías de la gente.

—¡Antes o después tendrá que haber habladurías! Déjales que se distraigan.

—Aquí la gente es muy especial, y las cosas no son como en Inglaterra…, se está siempre delante de las candilejas, como ha dicho el *Burra Sahib*. Te voy a dar un ejemplo que no tiene ninguna importancia: cuando Adela se fue sola hasta un extremo del Club y Fielding la siguió, vi que Mrs. Callendar se estaba fijando. Se fijan en todo hasta que se cercioran de que eres como ellos.

—No creo que Adela llegue nunca a ser como ellos; es demasiado independiente.

—Lo sé; tiene una personalidad muy acusada —comentó Ronny con aire pensativo. A Mrs. Moore le pareció que su hijo se comportaba de una manera bastante absurda. Acostumbrada a la independencia de Londres, no se daba cuenta de que la India, aparentemente tan llena de misterios, carece por completo de ella y que, en consecuencia, las conveniencias sociales tienen mucha más fuerza—. Supongo que no estará preocupada por algo —continuó.

—Pregúntale; pregúntaselo tú mismo, querido.

—Probablemente habrá oído historias sobre el calor pero, como es lógico, la mandaré a las montañas cada año en cuanto llegue abril… No se me ocurriría tener a mi mujer asándose en la llanura.

—No será el clima lo que le preocupe.

—El clima es la única cosa importante en la India, madre; es el alfa y el omega de todo el asunto.

—Sí, eso es lo que Mr. McBryde estaba diciendo, pero es mucho más probable que sean los ingleses de la India los que saquen de quicio a Adela. Piensa que no se portan amablemente con los indios, ¿comprendes?

—¿No te lo había dicho? —exclamó Ronny, perdiendo su tono comedido—. Me di cuenta la semana pasada. ¡Qué típico de una mujer

preocuparse por un problema secundario!

La sorpresa de Mrs. Moore fue tan grande que se olvidó de Adela.

—¿Un problema secundario? —repitió—. ¿Cómo es posible?

—¡No estamos aquí para comportarnos amablemente!

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Lo que estoy diciendo. Estamos aquí para hacer justicia y mantener la paz. Eso es lo que yo opino. La India no es una sala de visitas.

—Parece más bien la opinión de un dios —dijo ella calmosamente; en realidad, más que las opiniones de su hijo le irritaba su actitud.

Esforzándose por recobrar la calma, Ronny respondió:

—A la India le gustan los dioses.

—Y a los ingleses les gusta hacerse pasar por dioses.

—Todo esto no tiene sentido. Estamos aquí y aquí vamos a quedarnos; el país tiene que hacerse a la idea, tanto si somos dioses como si no. Vamos a ver —estalló de manera bastante patética—, ¿que?¿ queréis Adela y tú que haga yo? ¿Ir en contra de mi propia clase en contra de todas las personas que respeto y admiro? ¿Perder las posibilidades que tengo de hacer el bien en este país porque no me comporto amablemente? Ninguna de las dos entendéis lo que es el trabajo o de lo contrario no diríais esas tonterías. No me gusta hablar así, pero a veces resulta necesario. Es una cosa morbosa lo que Adela y tú estáis haciendo. Me he fijado en vosotras hoy en el Club…, después de todo el trabajo que el Administrador se había tomado para que pasarais un buen rato. Estoy aquí para trabajar, entérate, para retener por la fuerza este desdichado país. No soy un misionero, ni un diputado laborista ni un literato compasivo y vagamente sentimental. No soy más que un funcionario del Gobierno; ejerzo la profesión que tú mismo quisiste que escogiera, y eso es lo que cuenta. No somos amables en la India, y no tratamos de serlo. Tenemos algo más importante que hacer.

Ronny era sincero. Todos los días trabajaba mucho en el juzgado tratando de decidir cuál era la menos falsa entre dos versiones falsas de un hecho; tratando de impartir justicia con intrepidez, de proteger al débil contra el menos débil, al incoherente frente al verosímil, rodeado siempre de mentiras y adulaciones. Aquella misma mañana había condenado a un

empleado del ferrocarril por cobrar más a algunos peregrinos, y a un *pathan* por intento de violación. No esperaba gratitud ni reconocimiento, y sabía que tanto el empleado como el *pathan* podían apelar, y tras sobornar más eficazmente a sus testigos, conseguir la anulación de la sentencia. Era! su deber. Pero sí esperaba comprensión de sus compatriotas, y —con la excepción de algunos recién llegados— la obtenía. Estaba convencido de que no tenía por qué preocuparse de los *Bridge Parties* una vez terminada la jornada de trabajo, cuando le apetecía jugar al tenis con otras personas como él o descansar en una *chaiselongue* con las piernas extendidas.

Ronny era sincero al hablar como lo hacía, pero Mrs. Moore hubiese preferido que no se sintiera tan satisfecho. ¡Cómo se complacía en los inconvenientes de su situación! ¡Cómo insistía en que no m *se* hallaba en la India para comportarse amablemente y cuánta autocomplacencia derivaba de aquel hecho! Mrs. Moore recordó m sus días de estudiante. Había desaparecido toda traza de humanitarismo juvenil y Ronny hablaba ahora como un muchacho inteligente pero amargado. Sin escuchar su voz, sus palabras podían haberla impresionado, pero al oír el deje de autosatisfacción, al verla la boca que se movía tan contenta de sí misma y de manera tan competente debajo de la nariz encarnada, sintió, de manera perfectamente ilógica, que no era aquélla la última palabra sobre la India. Un mínimo de auténtica compunción —no algún estéril sustituto, sino el verdadero pesar que surge del corazón— habría hecho de Ronny un hombre distinto y convertido el Imperio británico en una institución diferente.

—Pues yo voy a defenderlo e incluso a imponerlo —dijo Mrs. Moore, haciendo tintinear sus sortijas—: los ingleses están aquí para ser amables.

—¡Cómo llegas a esa conclusión, madre? —preguntó Ronny, hablando otra vez suavemente, avergonzado de su irritabilidad.

—Porque la India es parte de la tierra. Y Dios nos ha puesto en la tierra para que seamos amables unos con otros. Dios… es amor —Mrs. Moore vaciló un momento, viendo lo mucho que aquel razonamiento molestaba a Ronny, pero algo le obligó a seguir adelante—. Dios nos ha puesto en la tierra para amar a nuestros prójimos y demostrarlo, y está presente en todas partes, incluso en la India, para ver si lo conseguimos.

La expresión de Ronny se hizo sombría, con un componente de ansiedad. Estaba al tanto de aquella vena de religiosidad de su madre, y sabía que era un síntoma de mala salud; se había acentuado mucho al morir su segundo marido. «No hay duda de que se está haciendo vieja; no debería molestarme nada pe lo que diga», pensó Ronny.

—El deseo de comportarse amablemente satisface a Dios… El deseo sincero, aunque impotente, de conseguirlo, basta para obtener sus bendiciones. Creo que todo el mundo fracasa, pero hay muchas maneras distintas de fracasar. Es un problema de buena voluntad y de más buena voluntad. Si hablo en lenguas…

Ronny esperó a que terminara y luego dijo amablemente:

—Claro que lo entiendo. Ahora me temo que tendré que ir a ver unos datos en el archivo y tú tendrás que acostarte.

—Supongo que sí, supongo que sí.

Tardaron unos minutos más en separarse, pero la conversación había dejado de tener sentido al entrar en ella el cristianismo. A Ronny le parecía bien la religión siempre que sirviera de apoyo al himno nacional, pero se oponía a que tratara de tener influencia en su vida. Cuando surgía esta última posibilidad, Ronny —con tono respetuoso pero firme— decía: «No me parece bien hablar de estas cosas, cada uno tiene que construirse su propia religión», y cualquier compatriota que le escuchaba, murmuraba: «¡De acuerdo!», con tono aprobatorio.

Mrs. Moore tuvo la impresión de haber cometido un error mencionando a Dios, pero cada vez le resultaba más difícil dejarlo de lado a medida que pasaban los años. Dios, sobre todo, había estado constantemente en sus pensamientos desde que llegara a la India aunque —cosa curiosa— cada vez se sentía menos satisfecha de Él, Se veía forzada a pronunciar su nombre con frecuencia, porque era el más poderoso que conocía, y, sin embargo, nunca le había parecido menos eficaz. Fuera del arco siempre parecía haber otro nuevo; más allá del eco más remoto, otro silencio. Y Mrs. Moore lamentó después no haber seguido hablando del tema verdaderamente serio que le había llevado a visitar la India: las relaciones

de Ronny con Adela. ¿Llegarían, o no llegarían, a prometerse en matrimonio?

Capítulo sexto

Aziz no había asistido al *Bridjge Party*. Inmediatamente después de su encuentro con Mrs. Moore su atención se había visto requerida por otros asuntos. Varios casos quirúrgicos le habían mantenido ocupado. Había dejado de ser el paria y el poeta para convertirse en el estudioso de la medicina que, rebosante de satisfacción, derramaba a manos llenas sobre los horrorizados oídos de sus amistades mil detalles de las operaciones que había realizado. Su profesión le fascinaba siempre que resultara estimulante y en Aziz lo científico no era la mente, sino la mano. Le entusiasmaba usar el bisturí con precisión y también le gustaba administrar los sueros más recientes. Pero la monotonía de los horarios y de la higiene le aburría profundamente, y después de vacunar a un hombre contra el tifus era capaz de beber agua sin molestarse en filtrarla. «¿Qué puede esperarse de un tipo así?», decía el malhumorado Mayor Callendar. «Ni tesón, ni agallas.» Pero en el fondo de su corazón sabía que si el año anterior Aziz y no él hubiese operado de apéndice a Mrs. Graysford, la anciana señora seguiría viviendo probablemente. Y esto no contribuía a hacerle sentirse mejor dispuesto hacia su subordinado.

Tuvieron un enfrentamiento la mañana siguiente después del encuentro en la mezquita: se peleaban constantemente. El Mayor, que se había pasado

en vela la mitad de la noche, quiso saber por qué demonios Aziz no se había presentado en seguida al recibir su nota.

—Tendrá que excusarme, Mayor, pero sí que acudí. Iba en la bicicleta y se me pinchó una rueda delante del Hospital de las Vacas. Así que tuve que buscar un *tonga*.

—¿Un pinchazo delante del Hospital de las Vacas? ¿Y cómo se las arregló para estar allí?

—¿Cómo dice?

—¡Señor, señor! Si yo vivo aquí —dio una patada en el suelo de grava — y usted ahí, a menos de diez minutos de mi casa, y el Hospital de las Vacas está en la otra dirección, allí, ¿cómo es posible que pasara por el Hospital de las Vacas viniendo en mi busca? Y ahora haga el favor de trabajar un poco para variar.

El Mayor Callendar se alejó furioso, sin esperar a que Aziz le diera una excusa, excusa que, dentro de sus limitaciones, era perfectamente válida: el Hospital de las Vacas estaba en la línea recta que unía la casa de Hamidullah y la del Mayor y era lógico que Aziz hubiera pasado por delante. Callendar nunca había llegado a percatarse de que los indios cultos se visitaban unos a otros constantemente y estaban tejiendo, aunque con muchas dificultades, un nuevo entramado social. El Mayor imaginaba que la casta «o algo por el estilo» se lo impediría. Lo único que sabía era que nadie le decía nunca la verdad, a pesar de que llevaba veinte años en la India, Aziz le vio alejarse con una sonrisa. Cuando estaba de buen humor tenía la impresión de que los ingleses eran una divertida institución, y disfrutaba si entendían mal sus palabras. Pero era una di versión de poca entidad, que un accidente o el paso del tiempo podía destruir; algo muy distinto de la alegría más honda que le proporcionaba estar con las personas en las que confiaba. Se le ocurrió un símil ofensivo que hacía referencia a Mrs. Callendar. «Tengo que decírselo a Mahmoud Ali; le hará reír», pensó. Después se puso a trabajar. Aziz era competente e indispensable y lo sabía. El símil se borró de su mente mientras hacía uso de su habilidad profesional.

Durante aquellos agradables días llenos de actividad, Aziz se enteró vagamente de que el Administrador daba una fiesta, y de que el Nabab Bahadur había dicho que todo el mundo debería ir. Su colega —también médico asistente— el doctor Panna Lal, estaba entusiasmado ante la perspectiva de la fiesta e insistió en que los dos fueran juntos en su nuevo *tum-tum*. Era un arreglo muy conveniente para ambos. Aziz se evitaba el oprobio de presentarse en bicicleta o el gasto de alquilar un vehículo, mientras que el doctor Panna Lal, que era apocado y entrado en años, contaba así con alguien capaz de manejar su caballo. También podría haberlo hecho él, pero con ciertas dificultades, y además le asustaban los automóviles y los giros para entrar en el recinto del Club, que le eran desconocidos. «Puede que ocurra algún desastre —había dicho cortésmente —, pero en todo caso llegaremos hasta allí sanos y salvos, aunque no regresemos nunca.» Después añadió, con algo más de lógica: «Creo que la llegada de dos médicos al mismo tiempo causará un buen efecto.»

Pero en el último momento Aziz sintió una repentina aversión ante la idea de asistir a la fiesta y decidió no ir. Por una parte, su breve temporada de trabajo, que acababa de terminar, le hacía sentirse independiente y lleno de salud. Por otra, el día elegido para la fiesta coincidió con el aniversario de la muerte de su esposa. La mujer de Aziz había fallecido muy poco después de que el joven médico se enamorara de ella; al principio no la había querido. Contagiado por la manera occidental de sentir, Aziz rechazaba la unión con una mujer que no había visto nunca; y, por añadidura, cuando por fin tuvo ocasión de verla le desilusionó y Aziz engendró su primer hijo sin otro estímulo que el simple deseo animal. El cambio se inició después del parto. Aziz fue dejándose ganar por el amor que ella le manifestaba, por una lealtad que iba más allá del simple sometimiento, y por los esfuerzos de su mujer para educarse con vistas a la abolición del *purdah* que, si no llegaba en su generación, se produciría en la siguiente. La mujer de Aziz era inteligente, sin que por ello le faltara un encanto muy a la antigua usanza. Gradualmente Aziz fue perdiendo el convencimiento de que sus familiares habían hecho una elección equivocada. El placer sensual…, bueno, en el caso de haberlo logrado, se

habría apagado al cabo de un año; a cambio había ganado algo que parecía crecer a medida que llevaban más tiempo viviendo juntos. Finalmente su mujer le dio un hijo varón… y había muerto al darle el segundo. Aziz tomó entonces conciencia de lo que había perdido, y de que nadie podría ocupar ya el lugar de su esposa; un amigo estaría más cerca de sustituirla que cualquier otra mujer. Ella se había ido, no había otra igual, y ¿qué era lo que la hacía única, sino el amor? Aziz lograba divertirse y olvidarla en ocasiones; pero en otros momentos comprendía que su mujer se había llevado al Paraíso toda la belleza y la alegría efe este mundo, y meditaba sobre la posibilidad del suicidio. ¿La encontraría más allá de la tumba? ¿Existe un sitio donde se producen tales reuniones? Aunque Aziz era ortodoxo, no estaba seguro. La unidad de Dios no podía ponerse en duda y había sido anunciada, de manera incuestionable, pero en todos los demás puntos Aziz fluctuaba como le sucede al cristiano medio; su fe en la vida eterna palidecía hasta 'convertirse en simple posibilidad, se desvanecía y volvía a reaparecer en una sola frase o en el espacio de una docena de latidos, de manera que más que él eran los corpúsculos de su sangre quienes parecían decidir la opinión que le correspondía mantener y por cuánto tiempo. Lo mismo le sucedía con todos sus puntos de vista. Nada permanecía, ni nada pasaba que no volviera después; la circulación era incesante y le mantenía joven, y el dolor por la muerte de su mujer era tanto más sincero por cuanto la lloraba muy de tarde en tarde.

Hubiera sido mucho más sencillo decirle al doctor Lal que había cambiado de opinión sobre la fiesta, pero Aziz no se dio cuenta del cambio hasta el último momento; de hecho no fue que cambiara de opinión, sino que una irresistible repugnancia se adueñó de su espíritu. Mrs. Callendar, Mrs. Lesley; no, no sería capaz de soportarlas en su aflicción: se darían cuenta de lo que le sucedía; porque Aziz atribuía a las matronas inglesas un extraño poder de intuición y sin duda aquellas damas disfrutarían torturándolo y burlándose de él ante sus maridos. Cuando tendría que haber estado listo para ir a la fiesta, se hallaba en la oficina de correos, escribiendo un telegrama ara sus hijos, y al regresar a su casa descubrió que el doctor Lal había pasado a recogerlo y se había marchado al descubrir su

ausencia. Bien, que se fuera, como correspondía a la vulgaridad de su naturaleza. El, por su parte, trataría de comunicarse con la muerta, *Y*, abriendo un cajón, sacó la fotografía de su esposa. Al contemplarla se le llenaron los ojos de lágrimas. «¡Qué desgraciado soy!», pensó. Pero como era realmente desgraciado otro impulso vino en seguida a mezclarse con la autocompasión: deseaba recordar a su mujer y no era capaz. ¿Por qué podía recordar a personas que no amaba? A esas otras las recordaba con gran nitidez, mientras que cuanto más contemplaba la fotografía, menos veía. La imagen de su mujer empezó a escapársele desde el momento mismo en que la llevaron a enterrar. Aziz había sabido que no estaría ya al alcance de sus manos y de sus oídos, pero creyó que viviría en su mente, sin darse cuenta de que el hecho mismo de que hayamos amado a los muertos aumenta su irrealidad, y que cuanto más apasionadamente los invocamos más se alejan de nosotros. Todo lo que le quedaba de su mujer era un trozo de cartón y tres hijos. Era insoportable. «¡Qué desgraciado soy!», pensó de nuevo, y se sintió más feliz. Había respirado por un instante la atmósfera de caducidad que rodea a los orientales y a todos los hombres, y se apartó de ella jadeante, porque todavía era joven. «Nunca jamás lograré superarlo —se dijo a sí mismo—. Mi carrera es un fracaso con toda seguridad, y mis hijos recibirán una pésima educación.» Como era una cosa segura, se esforzó por apartarla de sus pensamientos y se puso a repasar unas notas que había tomado sobre un caso del hospital. Quizás algún día una persona con mucho dinero necesitara precisamente aquella operación y Aziz lograra ganar con ella una suma considerable. Las anotaciones consiguieron interesarle por sí mismas y procedió a guardar la fotografía. El momento había pasado y Aziz no volvió a pensar en su esposa.

Después de tomar el té estaba de mejor humor y fue a ver a Hamidullah. Hamidullah había ido a la fiesta, pero no así su caballo, de manera que Aziz lo cogió prestado, y también los pantalones de montar de su amigo y el mazo para jugar al polo. Luego se dirigió al Maidan, que estaba desierto, excepto en un extremo, donde unos jóvenes del bazar se entrenaban. ¿Para qué? Les hubiera costado trabajo explicarlo, pero «entrenarse» era una palabra que estaba en el ambiente. Corrían en círculo, flacos y patizambos

—la constitución física que predominaba en la zona era lamentable—, y, en sus rostros, más que decisión, se reflejaba el deseo de mostrarse decididos. «Maharajá, *salaam*», les dijo Aziz, bromeando. Los muchachos se detuvieron para reír. Aziz les aconsejó que no se esforzaran más de la cuenta. Los otros se lo prometieron y continuaron corriendo. Cabalgando hasta el centro, Aziz empezó a dar golpes a la pelota.

No sabía jugar, pero el caballo sí, y se dispuso a aprender, libre de tensiones humanas. Mientras daba carreras sobre la oscura plataforma del Maidan, con el viento de la tarde acariciándole la frente y los ojos protegidos por la sombra de los árboles circundantes se olvidó por completo del desagradable problema que era vivir. La pelota se le escapó en dirección hacia un solitario oficial inglés que también estaba practicando; el militar se la devolvió y dijo:

—Mándemela otra vez.

—De acuerdo.

El recién llegado tenía cierta noción de lo que había que hacer, pero su caballo ninguna y, por tanto, las fuerzas estaban igualadas. Concentrándose en la pelota, llegaron de alguna forma a simpatizar, y se sonrieron al tirar de las riendas para dar un descanso a los caballos. A Aziz le gustaban los soldados —con ellos era fácil saber a qué atenerse: o lo aceptaban a uno o le insultaban, cosa siempre preferible a la altivez de los funcionarios civiles — y al oficial le caía bien cualquiera que supiese montar a caballo.

—¿Juega a menudo? —preguntó.

—Nunca.

—Juguemos otro *chukker*.

Al darle a la pelota, su caballo se encabritó y lo tiró al suelo. «¡Cielos!», exclamó, montándose de nuevo.

—¿Usted no se cae nunca?

—Muchas veces.

—Seguro que no.

De nuevo frenaron los caballos, los ojos iluminados por el fuego de la camaradería. Pero se fue enfriando al mismo tiempo que sus cuerpos, porque los ejercicios atléticos sólo provocan un calor momentáneo. La

nacionalidad estaba volviendo a hacer acto de presencia, pero se despidieron, saludándose, antes de que su veneno empezara a hacer efecto. «Si todos fueran como él», pensaron ambos.

Se estaba poniendo el sol. Unos cuantos correligionarios de Aziz se habían presentado en el Maidan y rezaban con el rostro vuelto hacia La Meca. Un toro consagrado a Siva caminaba en su dirección y Aziz, aun sin ganas de rezar él mismo, no vio ningún motivo para que los mahometanos se vieran molestados por aquel torpe animal ligado a prácticas idolátricas, y le dio un golpe con el mazo de polo para desviarlo. Mientras estaba así ocupado, una voz le llamó desde la carretera: se trataba del doctor Panna Lal, que regresaba muy afligido de la fiesta del Administrador.

—Doctor Aziz, doctor Aziz, ¿dónde estaba usted? Le estuve esperando diez minutos en su casa y luego me marché.

—Lo siento muchísimo… No tuve más remedio que ir a la oficina de correos.

Cualquier miembro de su propio círculo de amigos habría aceptado aquellas palabras como indicativas de un cambio de opinión hecho demasiado frecuente para merecer censura. Pero el doctor Lal, por ser de extracción humilde, no estaba seguro de si había existido intención de insultarle y el golpe de Aziz al toro de Siva había servido para aumentar su irritación.

—¿A la oficina de correos? ¿No manda usted a sus criados? —dijo.

—Tengo tan pocos que mis posibilidades son muy limitadas.

—Su criado habló conmigo. Tuve ocasión de verlo.

—Pero tenga usted en cuenta, doctor Lal, que no podía mandar a mi criado sabiendo que usted venía. Llega usted, nos vamos los dos y quizá para cuando mi criado estuviese de vuelta habrían desaparecido todas las cosas de mi propiedad que cualquier maleante pudiera llevarse consigo. ¿Querría usted que me sucediera eso? El cocinero es sordo {no se puede contar con él para nada) y el criado que hace los recados no es más que un niño. Hassan y yo nunca salimos de casa al mismo tiempo. Es una regla que no admite excepciones.

Aziz dijo todo esto y mucho más por pura cortesía, para salvar las apariencias. No estaba ofreciendo sus excusas como hechos verificables y era injusto criticarlas por inexactas. Pero el otro se dedicó a echarlas abajo: una tarea tan fácil como innoble.

—Aunque fuera así, ¿qué le impedía dejar una nota explicando dónde había ido? —replicó el doctor Lal, añadiendo después otros comentarios parecidos.

A Aziz le desagradaba mucho la mala educación e hizo dar un salto a su caballo.

—¡Váyase más lejos, o hará que se contagie el mío! —gimió el doctor Lal, poniendo de manifiesto la verdadera causa de su irritación—. Se ha portado como un salvaje toda la tarde. Ha echado a perder algunas de las flores más valiosas del jardín del Club y han sido necesarios cuatro hombres para sacarlo del arríate. Con caballeros y damas inglesas viéndolo todo y el mismo *Sahib* Administrador tomando nota mentalmente. Pero no quisiera hacerle perder su valioso tiempo, doctor Aziz. No creo que esto pueda interesarle a una persona que tiene tantos compromisos y que manda tantos telegramas. Yo no soy más que un pobre médico viejo que creyó oportuno presentar sus respetos cuando y donde se le había indicado. Su ausencia, permítame que se lo diga, provocó comentarios.

—¡Maldito lo que me importan esos comentarios!

—Es estupendo ser joven. ¡Maldito lo que me importan! Estupendo, sin duda. ¿Maldito, quién?

—Yo voy o dejo de ir según me apetece.

—Sin embargo, usted me hizo una promesa y luego ha inventado esa historia del telegrama. En marcha, Dapple.

Se alejaron, y Aziz tuvo un incontrolable deseo de ganarse un enemigo para toda la vida. Podía lograrlo muy fácilmente galopando cerca del doctor. Así lo hizo, y Dapple se desbocó. Aziz regresó al Maidan con gran estruendo de cascos de caballo. La exaltación por haber jugado al polo con el oficia] inglés se prolongó todavía unos minutos y Aziz galopó y se abalanzó sobre la pelota hasta quedar cubierto de sudor; y aún se sentía completamente seguro cíe sí mismo mientras se dirigía a la cuadra de

Hamidullah para devolver el caballo. Pero nada más echar pie a tierra empezó a acobardarse. ¿Habría caído en desgracia con las autoridades? ¿Habría ofendido al Administrador faltando a la fiesta? £1 doctor Panna Lal era una persona sin importancia, pero ¿no era una imprudencia pelearse con él? Empezó a ver las cosas desde el lado político en lugar del humano. Dejó de pensar «¿Puedo entenderme con la gente?» para preocuparse de «¿Son más fuertes que yo?», contagiándose así de las nocivas emanaciones que más abundaban en aquel momento.

En su casa le esperaba una nota con el sello del Gobierno. Descansaba sobre su mesa como una sustancia explosiva que al menor roce haría saltar por los aires su frágil bungalow. Iban a despedirlo por no haber asistido a la fiesta. Cuando abrió el mensaje resultó ser algo completamente distinto: una invitación de Mr. Fielding, el Director del Instituto, pidiéndole que fuera el jueves a tomar el té. Aziz recobró de golpe su buen humor. Lo hubiese recobrado de todas formas, porque poseía un alma capaz de sufrir, pero no de asfixiarse y llevaba una vida muy estable por debajo de su aparente inconstancia. Pero la invitación le produjo una alegría muy especial, porque Fielding le había invitado a tomar el té un mes antes y Aziz se había olvidado por completo: ni contestó ni fue, simplemente se olvidó. Y ahora le llegaba una segunda invitación, sin un reproche ni la más mínima alusión a su falta. Era una manifestación de auténtica cortesía —el gesto que revela un corazón magnánimo—, y Aziz tomó la pluma y escribió una respuesta muy afectuosa; después salió a toda prisa hacia la casa de Hamidullah en busca de noticias, porque no había hablado nunca con el Director del Instituto y creía que el proyectado encuentro rellenaría la única laguna importante de su vida. Aziz anhelaba saberlo todo sobre aquel hombre espléndido: el dinero que ganaba, sus preferencias, sus antecedentes, la mejor manera de agradarle. Pero Hamidullah no había vuelto aún, y Mahmoud Ali, que sí estaba en la casa, sólo se hallaba dispuesto a hacer chistes groseros y sin ninguna gracia sobre la fiesta.

Capítulo séptimo

Mr. Fielding había tomado contacto con la India pasada ya la primera juventud. Tenía más de cuarenta años cuando penetró por ese extraño pórtico que es la estación Victoria de Bombay, y, junto con su equipaje (después de sobornar a un revisor europeo), se instaló por primera vez en el interior de un tren tropical. Aquel viaje había llegado a hacerse muy significativo en el recuerdo. De sus dos acompañantes, uno era joven y tan ignorante como él del mundo oriental, mientras que el otro, de su misma edad, llevaba muchos años en la India. Un abismo le separaba de los dos: había visto demasiadas ciudades y demasiados hombres para ser como el primero o para llegar a convertirse en el segundo. Nuevas impresiones se acumularon en seguida, pero no eran las ortodoxas; el pasado las condicionaba, y lo mismo sucedió con sus errores. Por ejemplo: considerar a los indios como si fueran italianos no es un error común ni, posiblemente, funesto y Fielding trataba con frecuencia de establecer analogías entre la península indostánica y esa otra, más pequeña y más exquisitamente modelada, que bañan las aguas del Mediterráneo.

Su carrera, aunque dentro del mundo académico, era amplia, y había incluido períodos moralmente recusables, seguidos de arrepentimiento. En el momento presente Fielding era una persona tenaz, ecuánime, inteligente, casi de edad mediana y con fe en la educación. Le daba lo mismo enseñar a

unos que a otros: había tenido a su cargo chicos de buenas familias, deficientes mentales y policías y no le importaba añadir los indios a aquella lista. Gracias a las recomendaciones de algunos amigos había sido nombrado director del pequeño Instituto de Chandrapore; se sentía a gusto y suponía que estaba teniendo éxito. Esto último era cierto en el caso de sus alumnos, pero la distancia entre él y sus compatriotas, que ya había notado en el tren, había crecido de manera alarmante. Al principio no era capaz de entender las causas. No es que le faltara patriotismo: siempre se había entendido bien con los ingleses en Inglaterra, y todos sus mejores amigos eran ingleses, así que, ¿cómo explicar que no sucediera lo mismo en Chandrapore? Exteriormente, Fielding era uno de esos hombres grandes y desmañados de largas extremidades y ojos azules, y todo en él parecía inspirar confianza hasta que empezaba a hablar. Entonces había algo en su forma de expresarse que confundía a la gente y no lograba aquietar la desconfianza que inspiraba su profesión. Inevitablemente, ese mal que es la inteligencia tiene que estar presente en la India, pero ¡ay de aquel que se consagra a fomentarla! Se fue extendiendo la idea de que Mr. Fielding era una fuerza destructora y no andaban descaminados, porque las ¡deas son funestas para la preservación de las castas y él usaba las ideas de la manera más efectiva: intercambiándolas. Sin ser misionero ni estudiante, Fielding se sentía feliz en el toma y daca de una conversación privada. El mundo, creía él, es un conjunto de hombres que tratan de ponerse en contacto unos con otros y como mejor pueden hacerlo es con la ayuda de la buena voluntad, de la cultura y de la inteligencia: un credo muy poco adecuado para Chandrapore, pero Fielding había llegado allí demasiado tarde para pensar en modificarlo. Carecía de prejuicios raciales: no porque fuera superior a sus compatriotas, sino porque había alcanzado la madurez en una atmósfera diferente, donde no florecía el instinto de rebaño. La observación que más le había perjudicado en el Club había sido un inocente comentario en el que vino a decir que las así llamadas razas blancas eran más bien de un color gris rosáceo. Fielding dijo esto únicamente para mostrarse jovial, sin darse cuenta de que «blanco» tiene tan poco que ver con cualquier color como «Dios salve al Rey» con cualquier dios, y que el colmo de la

incorrección es reflexionar sobre lo que connota. El varón gris rosáceo con el que estaba hablando se escandalizó de manera casi perceptible, pero su sentimiento de inseguridad, una vez despertado, le llevó a comunicárselo al resto del rebaño.

De todas formas, los hombres le toleraban debido a su buen corazón y a su cuerpo musculoso; fueron sus mujeres las que decidieron que Fielding no era realmente un *sahib*. Le encontraban desagradable. Él no tenía atenciones con ellas, y esto, que no hubiera ocasionado comentarios en la Inglaterra feminista, le perjudicó mucho en una comunidad donde se cuenta con que el varón sea desenvuelto y servicial. Mr. Fielding no daba consejos sobre perros o caballos, no iba a cenar a las casas de sus compatriotas, no nacía visitas al mediodía, ni, durante la Navidad, adornaba árboles para los hijos de las damas inglesas y, cuando acudía al Club, era sólo para jugar al tenis o al billar y después marcharse. Había descubierto que era posible mantenerse en contacto con los indios y con los ingleses, pero que para ocuparse de las inglesas tendría que dar de lado a los indios. Era imposible combinarlos a los dos. No servía de nada culpar a ninguno de los dos grupos, ni tampoco acusarles de echarse las culpas mutuamente. Las cosas eran como eran, y no quedaba otro remedio que elegir. La mayoría de los ingleses preferían a sus compatriotas del sexo femenino que, incorporándose cada vez en mayor número a los núcleos de funcionarios, hacían más posible de año en año un estilo de vida semejante al de Inglaterra. Mr, Fielding había encontrado más conveniente y agradable frecuentar a los indios y tenía que pagar el precio. Por regla general ninguna inglesa entraba en el instituto excepto con motivo de actos oficiales, y si Fielding había invitado a Mrs. Moore y a Miss Quested a tomar el té era porque se trataba de recién llegadas que verían todo sin prejuicios, aunque fuera de una manera superficial, y que no cambiarían de tono de voz para hablar con los otros invitados.

El Instituto mismo había sido construido de manera sumamente expeditiva por el departamento de Obras Públicas, pero su recinto incluía un antiguo jardín y, dentro de él, un pabellón que Fielding utilizaba como

vivienda durante la mayor parte del año. Se estaba vistiendo después de bañarse cuando un criado anunció la llegada del doctor Aziz.

—Considérese como en su casa —le dijo Fielding desde el dormitorio, alzando un poco la voz.

Se trataba de una observación completamente espontánea, como la mayoría de sus acciones; era lo que se sentía inclinado a decir por naturaleza.

Para Aziz la frase tenía un significado muy definido.

—¿Lo dice usted de verdad, Mr. Fielding? Es muy amable por su parte —respondió—. Me gusta mucho poder prescindir de las fórmulas protocolarias.

Aziz se sintió rebosante de buen humor mientras examinaba de un vistazo la sala de estar. Había algunos objetos lujosos, pero ningún orden: nada que sirviera para intimidar a un pobre indio. Era también una habitación muy hermosa que se asomaba al jardín por tres arcos de madera.

—Lo cierto es que hace mucho que quería conocerle —continuó—. ¡He oído hablar tanto al Nabab Bahadur de su generoso corazón¡ Pero ¿dónde puede uno llegar a conocerse en un sitio tan deseable como Chandrapore? —Se acercó un poco más a la puerta del dormitorio—. Voy a contarle lo que hacía cuando no era más que un recién llegado: solía desear que se pusiera usted enfermo para conocernos de esa manera. —Los dos rieron, y animado por el éxito Aziz comenzó a improvisar—. Me decía a mí mismo: «¿Qué aspecto tiene Mr. Fielding esta mañana? Quizás está un poco pálido. Y también el Cirujano-Jefe está pálido; no podrá atender a Mr. Fielding cuando empiecen los escalofríos.» Habrían tenido que mí. Luego habríamos disfrutado mucho conversando, usted un gran renombre como estudioso de la poesía me conoce usted de vista.

—Claro, naturalmente. ¿Y usted me conoce a mí?

—Le conozco muy bien por referencias.

—Llevo tan poco tiempo aquí, y siempre en un ambiente tan distinto del suyo, que no es extraño que nunca me haya visto; me sorprende incluso que sepa mi nombre. Se me ocurre una cosa, Mr. Fielding.

—¿Sí?

—Adivine el aspecto que tengo antes de salir. Será como un juego.

—Mide usted cinco pies y nueve pulgadas —dijo Fielding, haciendo el cálculo gracias a la sombra que se recortaba sobre el cristal esmerilado de la puerta del dormitorio.

—¡Excelente! ¿Qué más? ¿No tengo una venerable barba blanca?

—¡Maldita sea!.

——¿Le sucede algo?

—Acabo de romper el último pasador del cuello que tenía.

—Coja el mío, haga el favor.

—¿Lleva uno de repuesto?

—Sí, sí, espere un momento.

—No lo aceptaré si es el que está usted utilizando.

—No, no; lo tengo en el bolsillo. —Apartándose para que su silueta dejara de recortarse contra el cristal de la puerta, Aziz se quitó el cuello y sacó el pasador de oro, parte de un juego que su cuñado fe había traído de Europa—. Aquí está —exclamó.

—Tráigamelo usted mismo, si no tiene inconveniente.

—Un minuto.

Aziz se puso otra vez el cuello, rezando para que no se le alzara por detrás durante el té. El criado personal de Fielding, que le estaba ayudando a vestirse, le abrió la puerta del dormitorio.

—Muchas gracias.

Se estrecharon la mano, sonriendo. Aziz empezó a mirar alrededor, como hubiera hecho con un viejo amigo. A Fielding no le sorprendía la rapidez con que estaban intimando. Tratándose de un pueblo tan ligado a sus emociones, la intimidad se producía de inmediato o nunca, y como Aziz y él sólo habían oído cosas buenas el uno del otro, podían perfectamente prescindir de cualquier preliminar.

—Siempre he creído que los ingleses mantenían sus habitaciones perfectamente limpias. Parece que esa idea no es del todo cierta. No tengo por qué sentirme tan avergonzado. —Se sentó alegremente sobre la cama; luego, olvidado completamente de sí mismo, alzó las piernas y las dobló debajo de su cuerpo—. Todas las cosas fríamente ordenadas en estantes, es

lo que yo pensaba… Dígame, Mr. Fielding, ¿va usted a poder colocarse el pasador?

—Tengo mis dudas —respondió el otro, imitando el acento que suele atribuirse a los escoceses en las obras de teatro.

—Por favor, ¿qué es eso que acaba de decir? ¿Querrá usted enseñarme algunas palabras nuevas para que mejore mi inglés?

Fielding dudaba que fuera posible mejorar «todas las cosas fríamente ordenadas en estantes». A menudo le sorprendía la desenvoltura con que la joven generación manejaba una lengua extranjera. Modificaban las expresiones coloquiales, pero eran capaces de decir lo que querían y de decirlo muy de prisa; no utilizaban ninguno de los términos rimbombantes que se les atribuían en el Club. Aunque era evidente que el Club avanzaba muy despacio; todavía afirmaba que muy pocos mahometanos y ningún hindú estaban dispuestos a compartir la mesa de un inglés, y que todas las damas indias seguían sometidas a un *purdah* impenetrable. Individualmente, cada uno de sus miembros sabía que no era cierto; pero el Club en cuanto Club prefería no cambiar de opinión.

—Déjeme que le ponga yo el pasador. Ya veo… El ojal trasero de la camisa es más bien pequeño y sería una pena rasgarlo.

—¿Por qué demonios hay que llevar cuello duro? —gruñó Fielding mientras inclinaba la cabeza.

—Nosotros lo llevamos para pasar la revista de la policía.

—¿Cómo es eso?

—Si voy en bicicleta vestido a la inglesa (cuello almidonado, sombrero flexible) no se fijan en mí. Pero si me pongo un fez gritan «¡Lleva la luz apagada!» Lord Curzon no lo tuvo en cuenta cuando instó a los nativos a que siguieran usando sus llamativos trajes. ¡Bravo! Ya ha entrado el pasador. A veces cierro los ojos y sueño que llevo otra vez ropas espléndidas y cabalgo hacia el combate detrás de Alamgir. Mr. Fielding, ¿no tiene que haber sido la India muy hermosa entonces, con el Imperio mongol en su cenit y Alamgir reinando en Delhi, sobre el Trono del Pavo Real3?

—Vienen a tomar el té dos señoras que quieren hablar con usted… Creo que las conoce.

—¿Hablar conmigo? No conozco a ninguna señora.

—¿No conoce a Mrs. Moore y a Miss Quested?

—Ah, sí; ya recuerdo. —Nada más concluido, el encuentro en la mezquita había dejado de interesarle—. Una señora de avanzada edad; pero ¿le importaría repetir el nombre de su acompañante?

—Miss Quested.

—Como usted guste.

Pero Aziz se sentía decepcionado; hubiera preferido estar a solas con su nuevo amigo, en lugar de tener que compartirlo con otros invitados.

—Podrá usted hablar con Miss Quested del Trono del Pavo Real, si así lo desea… Se interesa por las artes, según dicen.

—¿Es posimpresionista?

—¡Nada menos que posimpresionismo! Venga a tomar el té. Este mundo de hoy me desborda por completo.

Aziz se ofendió. Aquella observación sugería que él, un indio sin importancia, no tenía derecho a estar al corriente del posimpresionismo, privilegio reservado única y exclusivamente a la raza dominante.

—No considero a Mrs. Moore amiga mía. Sólo hablé con ella por casualidad en mi mezquita —dijo Aziz con entonación fríamente ceremoniosa, y empezó a añadir «Una sola conversación es demasiado poco tiempo para crear una amistad», pero antes de que pudiera terminar la frase la frialdad se había esfumado, porque sintió nuevamente la fundamental buena voluntad de Fielding. La suya le salió al encuentro y las dos se unieron por debajo de las cambiantes mareas de la emoción, única capaz de llevar al viajero a puerto seguro, pero también de hacerle naufragar entre las rocas. Aziz estaba a salvo en realidad; tan a salvo como el habitante de tierra firme que sólo entiende de estabilidad y supone que todos los barcos naufragan, y además tenía sensaciones que quien vive en tierra firme no puede llegar a conocer. De hecho, era una persona sensible más que capaz de discriminación en sus sentimientos. Descubría un significado en cualquier observación, pero no siempre el verdadero y su vida, aunque

intensa, era en gran parte un sueño. Fielding, por ejemplo, no había querido decir que los indios fueran insignificantes, sino que el posimpresionismo es oscuro; su observación se encontraba a años luz del «¡Vaya! Hablan inglés» de Mrs. Turton, pero a Aziz las dos le resultaban iguales. Fielding se dio cuenta de que algo no había funcionado bien y también de que se había solucionado en seguida, pero como era un optimista en todo lo relativo a las relaciones personales no se inquietó, y siguieron charlando por los codos igual que antes.

—Además de las dos señoras espero a uno de los profesores del instituto, Narayan Godbole.

—¡Ah! ¡El brahmán del Decán!

—También él quiere que vuelva el pasado, pero no precisamente Alamgir.

—Imagino que no. ¿Sabe usted lo que dicen los brahmanes del Decán? Que Inglaterra les arrebató la India a ellos; a ellos, de se cuenta, y no a los mongoles. ¿No es un buen ejemplo de desfachatez? Han llegado incluso a dar sobornos para que aparezca en libros de texto, porque son muy astutos e inmensamente ricos. El profesor Godbole debe de ser muy distinto de todos los demás brahmanes del Decán por lo que he oído contar de él. Una persona muy sincera.

—¿Por qué no organizan ustedes un club en Chandrapore, Aziz?

—Quizás, algún día… Pero me parece que veo llegar a Mrs. Moore y a Miss…, no recuerdo su nombre.

Era muy agradable que se tratara de una reunión de amigos, donde no había que atenerse al protocolo. Gracias a esto Aziz descubrió que no le costaba hablar con las señoras inglesas y las trató como si fueran hombres. La belleza también le hubiese preocupado, porque entraña reglas propias, pero Mrs. Moore era tan vieja y Miss Quested tan fea que se vio libre de esa ansiedad. El cuerpo anguloso y las pecas de Adela eran defectos terribles a los ojos de Aziz, que se maravillaba de que Dios hubiera sido tan cruel con unas formas femeninas. La consecuencia fue que adoptó hacia Miss Quested una actitud de absoluta sinceridad.

—Querría preguntarle algo, doctor Aziz —empezó Adela—. Mrs. Moore me ha contado lo útil e interesante que fue su conversación en la mezquita. Aprendió más sobre la India en esos pocos minutos de charla que en las tres semanas desde que desembarcamos.

—Por favor, no hable de una cosa tan insignificante como ésa. ¿Hay algo más que pueda contarle sobre mi país?

—Quisiera que nos explicara una decepción que hemos sufrido esta mañana; debe de ser un problema de normas de comportamiento.

—Le aseguro que no existen en la India, prácticamente —replicó Aziz —. Somos, por naturaleza, un pueblo muy poco protocolario.

—Temo que hayamos cometido alguna equivocación y que les hayamos ofendido —dijo Mrs. Moore.

—Eso es todavía más difícil. Pero ¿les importaría explicarme lo sucedido?

—Una señora y un caballero indios tenían que mandar su coche a recogernos hoy, a las nueve de la mañana. No ha llegado. Hemos esperado y esperado y esperado; y no entendemos qué es lo que ha sucedido.

—Algún malentendido —dijo Fielding, viendo al instante que era uno de esos incidentes que es mejor no intentar aclarar.

—No, no ha sido eso —insistió Miss Quested—. Renunciaron incluso a ir a Calcuta para estar con nosotros. Hemos debido de cometer alguna estúpida equivocación, las dos estamos seguras.

—Yo no me preocuparía por ello.

—Eso es exactamente lo que me dice Mr. Heaslop —replicó ella, sonrojándose un poco—. Pero si una no se preocupa, ¿cómo va a entender lo que le sucede?

El anfitrión hubiera preferido cambiar de tema, pero Aziz manifestó un vivo interés por el incidente, y al oír algún fragmento del apellido de los transgresores afirmó que se trataba de hindúes.

—Hindúes descuidados…, sin idea de cómo comportarse en sociedad; los conozco muy bien por un doctor que tenemos en el hospital. ¡Es una persona tan descuidada y poco puntual! Más vale que no hayan ido ustedes a visitarlos, porque se hubieran hecho una idea equivocada de la India. Falta

de higiene. Mi opinión es que terminaron avergonzándose de su casa y ésa es la razón de que no fueran a buscarlas.

—Eso estoy dispuesto a aceptarlo —dijo Mr. Fielding.

—Me molestan muchísimo los misterios —anunció Adela.

—A todos los ingleses nos pasa lo mismo.

—No me molestan porque yo sea inglesa, sino desde un punto de vista personal —corrigió Miss Quested.

—A mí me gustan los misterios, pero más bien me molesta la confusión —dijo Mrs. Moore.

—Un misterio no es más que algo confuso.

—¿Lo dice usted en serio, Mr. Fielding?

—Misterio no es más que una palabra altisonante para confusión. En cualquier caso, no se consigue nada removiéndolo. Aziz y yo sabemos bien que el misterio de la India no es más que pura confusión.

—¿El misterio de la India? ¡Qué idea más inquietante!

—No habrá la menor confusión cuando vengan ustedes a verme —exclamó Aziz, sin saber muy bien lo que decía—. Mrs. Moore y los demás… Les invito a todos…, por favor.

La anciana señora aceptó: seguía pensando que el joven doctor era extraordinariamente simpático; y además un nuevo sentimiento, mitad lasitud, mitad excitación, la empujaba a seguir cualquier senda aún inexplorada. Miss Quested aceptó por lo que tenía de aventura. También a ella le gustaba Aziz, y creía que cuando lo conociera mejor podría descubrir la India con su ayuda. Le agradó mucho que la invitara y le pidió su dirección.

Aziz pensó con horror en su bungalow. Era una detestable casucha cerca de un bazar en la parte baja de la ciudad. Prácticamente no tenía más que una sola habitación infestada de moscas.

—Pero ahora vamos a hablar de otra cosa —exclamó—. Me gustaría vivir aquí. ¡Fíjense en esta hermosa habitación! Admirémosla juntos por unos instantes. Vean esas curvas en la parte inferior de los arcos. ¡Qué delicadeza! Es la arquitectura de la Pregunta y la Respuesta. Mrs. Moore, está usted en la India; no bromeo.

Aquella habitación le hacia sentirse inspirado. Era una sala de audiencias construida en el siglo XVIII para algún funcionario de alto rango y, aunque de madera, a Fielding le había hecho pensar en la Loggia de Lanzi de Florencia. Pequeñas habitaciones, ya europeizadas, le habían sido añadidas por dos lados, pero la sala central no tenía cristales ni papeles en las paredes, por lo que el aire del jardín entraba con toda libertad. Era como estar en público —en exhibición, por así decirlo—, a la vista de los jardineros que se dedicaban a chillar a los pájaros y del hombre que alquilaba el estanque para cultivar castañas de agua. Fielding alquilaba también los mancos —no había forma de saber quién podía entrar en el jardín— y sus criados permanecían de día y de noche en los escalones de la entrada para desanimar a los ladrones. La sala era realmente hermosa, y los ingleses no la habían echado a perder, mientras a Aziz, en uno de sus momentos «occidentales», podría haber colgado cuadros de Maude Goodman en las paredes. No había duda, sin embargo, de a quién pertenecía realmente la habitación…

—Estoy aquí impartiendo justicia —continuó Aziz—. Una pobre viuda a la que han robado se acerca a mí y le doy cincuenta rupias; a la otra le doy cien, y así sucesivamente. Me gustaría hacer eso.

Mrs. Moore sonrió, pensando en el método moderno, del que su hijo era un adecuado ejemplo.

—Me temo que las rupias no duren para siempre —dijo.

—Las mías, sí. Dios me daría más dinero al ver que yo lo repartía. Siempre hay que dar, como el Nabab Bahadur. Mi padre era igual, por eso murió pobre —y marcando sus puestos en diferentes puntos de la habitación, Aziz la pobló de escribientes y funcionarios, todos llenos de benevolencia porque habían vivido hacía muchos años—. Y así seguiríamos, dando todo el tiempo, sentados sobre la alfombra en lugar de utilizar sillas; ése es el cambio más importante entre ahora y entonces, pero creo que nunca castigaríamos a nadie.

Las señoras se mostraron de acuerdo.

—Pobre delincuente, hay que darle otra oportunidad. Ir a la cárcel sólo sirve para que un hombre se haga peor y se corrompa—. El rostro de Aziz

adquirió una expresión muy tierna: la ternura de alguien incapaz de administrar justicia, e incapaz de hacerse cargo de que si al pobre ladrón se le deja en libertad volverá a robar a la pobre viuda. Aziz se enternecía ante todo el mundo, con la excepción de unos pocos enemigos de su familia a quienes no consideraba humanos; de estos últimos sí deseaba vengarse. Aziz sentía ternura incluso hacia los ingleses; en el fondo de su corazón sabía que no podían dejar de ser fríos y extraños, ni de circular por su país como una corriente de agua helada—. No castigaremos a nadie —repitió— y por la noche daremos un gran banquete con baile de bayaderas, y hermosas muchachas adornarán los lados del estanque y prenderán fuegos artificiales y todos comerán opíparamente y serán felices hasta el día siguiente, cuando se hará justicia de nuevo (cincuenta, cien, mil rupias) hasta que venga la paz, ¡ Ah!, ¿por qué no habremos vivido en esa época? Pero ¿están ustedes admirando la casa de Mr. Fielding? Vean los pilares pintados de azul y las galerías; los pabellones (¿cómo los llaman ustedes?) que están sobre nosotros también son azules por dentro. Fíjense en cómo están esculpidos. Piensen en las horas de trabajo que fueron necesarias. Sus delicados techos también se curvan para imitar el bambú…, y miren los bambúes que se balancean junto al estanque. ¡Mrs. Moore! ¡Mrs. Moore!

—¿Sí? —dijo ella, riendo.

—¿Se acuerda del agua en nuestra mezquita? Baja desde allí a llenar este estanque… un hábil plan de los emperadores. Se detenían aquí yendo hacia Bengala. Les gustaba mucho el agua. Dondequiera que iban creaban fuentes, jardines, *hammam*. Le estaba diciendo a Mr. Fielding que hubiera dado cualquier cosa por servirles.

Aziz se equivocaba en cuanto al agua, que ningún emperador, por hábil que sea, puede lograr que se traslade cuesta arriba; entre la mezquita y la casa de Fielding había una depresión bastante profunda y la ciudad de Chandrapore en toda su extensión. Ronny le hubiera rebatido su afirmación; Turton hubiese querido hacerlo, pero se habría contenido. Fielding no sintió siquiera deseos de rebatirle; había embotado sus ansias de verdad textual y se interesaba fundamentalmente por lo que era verdad desde un estado de ánimo concreto. En cuanto a Miss Quested, aceptaba literalmente como

verdad todo lo que Aziz decía. En su ignorancia le consideraba como «la India» y no se le ocurría que su punto de vista fuera limitado y su método poco preciso, ni que fuera imposible identificar a nadie con la India.

Aziz estaba ya muy excitado, hablando por los codos, e incluso diciendo «maldición» cuando se hacía un lío con alguna frase. Les habló de su profesión, y de las operaciones que había presenciado y llevado a cabo él mismo, descendiendo a detalles que asustaron a Mrs. Moore, mientras que Miss Quested los confundió con pruebas de su amplitud de espíritu; ella había oído hablar así, con deliberada franqueza, en círculos académicos avanzados. Adela se imaginó que Aziz era un hombre emancipado y de toda confianza y lo situó en una cumbre que no estaba en condiciones de ocupar por mucho tiempo. De momento había subido bastante alto, sin duda, pero no se hallaba en ninguna cima. Había ascendido a fuerza de alas y el primer momento de debilidad volvería a depositarlo en el suelo.

La llegada del profesor Godbole le calmó en cierta manera, pero la tarde siguió siendo suya. El brahmán, cortés y enigmático, no puso obstáculos a su elocuencia, e incluso la aplaudió. Tomó el té a cierta distancia de los demás por razones de casta, utilizando una mesa situada ligeramente a su espalda; al estirarse hacia atrás era como si encontrara los alimentos por casualidad; todos fingieron no darse cuenta de que el profesor Godbole tomaba el té. Era un hombre de edad y lleno de arrugas, con bigote gris y ojos gris-azulados, y su tez era tan blanca como la de un europeo. Llevaba un turbante que parecía hecho de pálidos macarrones morados, chaqueta, chaleco, *dhoti* y calcetines a cuadros. Los cuadros hacían juego con el turbante y todo su aspecto daba una impresión de armonía; como si hubiera reconciliado los productos del Este y del Oeste, tanto mentales como físicos, y nada pudiera ya nunca descomponerle. Las señoras sintieron mucho interés por él y tenían la esperanza de que completara lo dicho por el doctor Aziz añadiendo algo sobre religión. Pero el profesor Godbole no hacía más que comer; comer y comer, sonriendo, y sin permitir nunca que sus ojos se detuvieran a ver lo que hacían sus manos.

Dejando de lado a los emperadores mongoles, Aziz se orientó hacia temas que no resultaran ofensivos para nadie. Describió cómo maduraban

los mangos y cómo en la adolescencia, durante la estación de las lluvias, se iba corriendo a un huerto que pertenecía a un tío suyo y comía hasta saciarse.

—Luego había que volver a casa calado hasta los huesos y quizá con dolor de tripa. Pero no me importaba. También a mis amigos les dolía la tripa. En urdu tenemos un proverbio: «¿Qué importa la infelicidad cuando todos somos desgraciados juntos?», que viene muy bien a propósito de los mangos. Miss Quested, espere usted a que maduren los mangos. ¿Por qué no se instala definitivamente en la India?

—Me temo que no voy a poder —dijo Adela, haciendo aquella observación sin pensar en su significado.

Para ella, como para los tres hombres, parecía estar en armonía con la conversación, y tuvieron que pasar algunos minutos —media hora, en realidad— antes de que Miss Quested se diera cuenta de que había dicho algo importante, y de que tendría que habérselo comunicado primero a Ronny.

—Los visitantes como ustedes no son nada frecuentes.

—Así es, ciertamente —dijo el profesor Godbole—. Tanta afabilidad no se encuentra casi nunca. Pero ¿qué podemos ofrecerles para que se queden?

—Mangos, mangos.

Todos rieron.

—Hasta en Inglaterra se consiguen mangos ahora —indicó Fielding—. Los transportan en bodegas a muy baja temperatura. Al parecer, puede hacerse la India en Inglaterra, de la misma forma que se hace Inglaterra en India.

—Terriblemente caro en ambos casos —dijo la muchacha.

—Supongo que sí.

—Y desagradable.

Pero el anfitrión no estaba dispuesto a que la conversación tomara aquel derrotero tan desalentador. Se volvió hacia la anciana señora, que parecía confundida e irritada —Fielding no podía imaginar por qué razón—, y le preguntó por sus planes. Mrs. Moore replicó que le gustaría visitar el

Instituto. Todos se pusieron en pie inmediatamente, con la excepción del profesor Godbole, que estaba terminando de comerse un plátano.

—No hace falta que vengas, Adela; nunca te gustan los edificios públicos.

—Sí, eso es cierto —dijo Miss Quested, sentándose de nuevo.

Aziz tuvo un momento de vacilación. Su público se estaba dividiendo. La mitad que le era más familiar se marchaba, pero quedaba la mitad que le escuchaba con más interés. Al recordar que se trataba de una reunión sin protocolo, decidió quedarse.

Siguieron hablando como antes. ¿Era posible ofrecer a los visitantes un dulce hecho con mangos sin madurar?

—Hablando como médico tengo que decir que no —dictaminó Aziz.

—Pero yo les mandaré unos dulces muy agradables. Será un placer para mí —dijo el anciano.

—Los dulces del profesor Godbole son deliciosos, Miss Quested —dijo Aziz con un dejo de tristeza, porque también él quería enviarles dulces y no tenía una esposa que los preparara—. Eso sí que será algo representativo de la India. Yo, en mi pobre posición, no estoy en condiciones de ofrecerles nada.

—No entiendo por qué dice usted eso, cuando ha sido tan amable de invitarnos a su casa.

Aziz pensó de nuevo con horror en su bungalow. ¡Cielo santo, aquella chica tan estúpida se lo había tomado al pie de la letra! ¿Qué podía hacer él?

—Sí, ya está decidido —exclamó—. Les invito a todos a reunirse conmigo en las Cuevas de Marabar.

—Me encantará hacerlo.

—Eso merece la pena mucho más que mis dulces. Pero, ¿Miss Quested no ha visitado todavía nuestras cuevas?

—No. Ni tan siquiera he oído hablar de ellas.

—¿No ha oído hablar de ellas? —exclamaron los dos—. ¿De las Cuevas de Marabar en las Colinas de Marabar?

—En el Club no se oye nada interesante. No se hace más que hablar de tenis y cotillear sobre las cosas más ridículas.

El anciano guardó silencio, quizá pensando que era impropio de una señorita criticar a las personas efe su raza, o quizá temeroso de que, si se mostraba de acuerdo, ella lo denunciara por deslealtad. Pero el más joven intervino con un rápido «Sí, claro».

—Entonces, cuéntenme todo lo que quieran, o de lo contrario nunca entenderé la India. ¿Se trata de las colinas que veo a veces por las tardes? ¿Qué son esas cuevas?

Aziz trató de explicar cómo eran, pero en seguida se puso de manifiesto que nunca había visitado las cuevas: siempre había tenido «intención» de ir, pero el trabajo o algún asunto personal se lo habían impedido y además ¡estaban tan lejos! El profesor Godbole se burló de él amablemente:

—Mí querido señor, ¡la paja y la viga! ¿No ha oído usted nunca ese proverbio tan útil?

—¿Son grandes las cuevas? —preguntó Adela.

—No, no lo son.

—Haga el favor de describirlas, profesor Godbole.

—Será un gran honor —acercó la silla y en su rostro apareció una expresión tensa. Adela abrió su pitillera, se la ofreció al profesor y a Aziz y encendió un cigarrillo ella misma. Después de una pausa solemne, el anciano dijo—: Hay que penetrar por una entrada en la roca, y a través de ella se llega a la cueva.

—¿Algo parecido a las grutas de Elephanta?

—No, no; en absoluto; en Elephanta hay esculturas de Siva y Parvati. En Marabar no hay esculturas.

—Se trata, sin duda, de un lugar sagrado —dijo Aziz, tratando de colaborar en la narración.

—No, no.

—Pero están decoradas de alguna forma.

—No.

—Entonces, ¿por qué son tan famosas? Todos hablamos de las famosas Cuevas de Marabar. Quizá no sea más que una fanfarronada nuestra, sin

valor alguno.

—No; no diría yo eso.

—Descríbaselas entonces a esta señorita.

—Será un gran placer —pero inmediatamente renunció al placer, y Aziz se dio cuenta de que ocultaba algo acerca de las cuevas.

Lo entendió porque a menudo también se tropezaba con un impedimento similar. A veces, para exasperación del Mayor Callendar, Aziz pasaba por alto el dato más importante en una exposición y describía con minuciosidad cien detalles insignificantes. El Mayor le acusaba de duplicidad, y tenía razón hasta cierto punto, pero sólo hasta cierto punto. Era más bien como si una fuerza que no podía controlar silenciara su mente de manera caprichosa. Lo mismo estaba pasando con la del profesor Godbole; involuntariamente, sin duda, ocultaba algo. Si se le manejaba con habilidad, tal vez recuperara el control y fuera capaz de anunciarles que las Cuevas de Marabar… estaban… llenas de estalactitas, quizá; Aziz le fue llevando en aquella dirección, pero tampoco era ése el caso.

El diálogo seguía siendo fluido y amistoso, y Adela no se daba cuenta en absoluto de sus corrientes subterráneas. Ignoraba que la mente comparativamente simple del mahometano se tropezaba con la Noche Ancestral. Aziz estaba empeñado en un juego muy emocionante. Manipulaba un juguete humano que se negaba a funcionar: eso lo tenía perfectamente claro. Si lograba ponerlo en marcha, ni él ni el profesor Godbole saldrían beneficiados, pero intentarlo le fascinaba y era algo muy parecido al pensamiento abstracto. De manera que Aziz seguía charlando, viéndose derrotado a cada movimiento por un contrario que ni siquiera admitía la existencia de ese movimiento y hallándose cada vez más lejos de descubrir qué era lo que las Cuevas de Marabar tenían de extraordinario, si es que realmente tenían algo de extraordinario. Estaban en esto cuando apareció Ronny. Sin hacer el menor esfuerzo por ocultar lo incómodo que se sentía, gritó desde el jardín: —¿Qué se ha hecho de Fielding? ¿Dónde está mi madre?

—¡Buenas tardes! —replicó Adela fríamente..

—Quiero que madre y tú vengáis inmediatamente. Va a haber un partido de polo.

—Creía que no iba a haber polo.

—Se ha modificado el programa. Han llegado algunos militares. Ven conmigo y te lo explicaré todo.

—Su madre volverá en seguida —dijo el profesor Godbole, que se había puesto en pie respetuosamente—. Nuestro pobre Instituto tiene muy pocas cosas que ver.

Ronny, sin darse por aludido, siguió dirigiéndose a Adela; había venido a toda prisa de su trabajo para llevarla a ver jugar al polo porque pensaba que le gustaría. No quería mostrarse descortés con los dos nombres, pero Ronny no conocía otro vínculo de comunicación con un indio que el oficial y ni Aziz ni Godbole tenían con él relación de subordinados. En cuanto personas particulares, era como si no existiesen.

Desgraciadamente, debido a su estado de ánimo, Aziz no se sentía inclinado a pasar inadvertido. No estaba dispuesto a renunciar a la atmósfera de tranquila intimidad que había presidido los últimos sesenta minutos. No se había levantado al hacerlo Godbole y luego, con tono ofensivamente amistoso, se dirigió a Ronny desde su asiento:

—Venga a reunirse con nosotros, Mr. Heaslop; siéntese hasta que vuelva su madre.

Ronny replicó ordenando a uno de los criados de Fielding que fuera en busca de su amo inmediatamente.

—Quizá no le entienda. Permítame…

Aziz repitió la orden de manera más precisa.

Ronny estuvo a punto de replicar; conocía aquel tipo de individuo; conocía todos tos tipos, y aquél era el occidentalizado echado a perder. Pero Ronny era un funcionario del Gobierno y su misión era evitar «incidentes», de manera que no dijo nada e ignoró las sucesivas provocaciones que Aziz le fue ofreciendo. Aziz se mostraba provocador. Todo lo que decía tenía un aire impertinente o resultaba desagradable. Le estaban fallando las alas, pero se negaba a caer sin hacer un esfuerzo. No se proponía ser impertinente con Mr. Heaslop, que nunca le había hecho el menor daño,

pero aquel anglo-indio tenía que convertirse en un ser humano para que todos los demás volvieran a sentirse a gusto. No se proponía mostrarse suntuosamente confidencial con Miss Quested: tan sólo asegurarse su apoyo; como tampoco era intención suya adoptar una actitud demasiado ruidosa y jovial con el profesor Godbole. Un extraño cuarteto: Aziz revoloteando cada vez más cerca del suelo, Miss Quested desconcertada ante el carácter repentinamente desagradable que tomaban las cosas, Ronny colérico y el brahmán observando a los tres, pero con los ojos bajos y las manos cruzadas sobre el pecho, como si no sucediera nada digno de atención. Una escena de una obra de teatro, pensó Fielding, que pudo verlos en seguida desde lejos, al otro lado del jardín, agrupados entre las columnas azules de su hermosa sala.

—No te molestes en venir, madre —dijo Ronny alzando la voz—; nos estamos marchando. —Luego fue muy de prisa a reunirse con Fielding y, haciendo un aparte, le dijo con falsa espontaneidad—: Perdóneme por lo que voy a decir, pero creo que quizá no debiera haber dejado sola a Miss Quested.

—Lo siento, ¿qué ha pasado? —replicó Fielding, tratando también de mostrarse atable.

—Bueno…, soy uno de esos típicos burócratas, no cabe duda; pero no me gusta que una chica inglesa se quede sola fumando con dos indios.

—Si se ha quedado y se ha puesto a fumar ha sido por propia voluntad, desde luego.

—Sí, eso está muy bien en Inglaterra.

—Sinceramente, no veo qué pueda tener de malo.

—Si no lo ve, no lo ve… ¿No se da cuenta de que ese individuo es un tipo vulgar?

Aziz, ostentosamente, trataba a Mrs. Moore con aire protector.

—No es un tipo vulgar —protestó Fielding—. Tiene los nervios de punta, eso es todo.

—¿Y qué es lo que ha desquiciado esos nervios suyos tan delicados?

—No lo sé. Estaba perfectamente cuando le dejé.

—Bueno, no ha sido nada que yo haya dicho —explicó Ronny con tono apaciguador—. No le he dirigido la palabra.

—En ese caso no tiene más que llevarse a las señoras; hemos evitado la catástrofe.

—Fielding…, no piense que me lo tomo a mal, ni nada parecido.

—Imagino que no querrá venir a ver el partido de polo con nosotros? Nos encantaría que lo hiciera.

—Me temo que no puedo, pero gracias de todas formas. Siento muchísimo que tenga la impresión de que me he descuidado. No era ésa mi intención.

Acto seguido se iniciaron las despedidas. Todos estaban enfadados o se sentían desgraciados. Era como si la tierra misma rezumara irritación. ¿Podría alguien haberse mostrado tan mezquino en un brezal escocés o en una montaña de Italia?, se preguntaba Fielding después. Parecía como si en la India no existiera una reserva de tranquilidad de la que pudiera echarse mano en el momento oportuno. O faltaba completamente o bien la tranquilidad devoraba todo lo demás, como parecía suceder con el profesor Godbole. Allí estaba Aziz, fanfarrón y perfectamente detestable, Mrs. Moore y Miss Quested, las dos desconcertadas, y Heaslop y él mismo, corteses en apariencia, pero odiándose cordialmente.

—Hasta pronto, Mr. Fielding, y muchísimas gracias… ¡Qué hermosos los edificios del Instituto!

—Hasta pronto, Mrs. Moore.

—Hasta pronto, Mr. Fielding. Ha sido una reunión muy interesante…

—Hasta pronto, Miss Quested.

—Hasta pronto, doctor Aziz.

—Hasta pronto, Mrs. Moore.

—Hasta pronto, doctor Aziz.

—Hasta pronto, Miss Quested. —Le estrechó la mano con un amplio movimiento hacia arriba y hacia abajo, para mostrar que se sentía perfectamente a gusto—. ¿No se olvidará usted de las cuevas, verdad? Lo tendré todo arreglado en un santiamén.

—Gracias…

—¡Es una lástima que se vaya usted tan pronto de la India! ¡Piénselo mejor, y quédese! —añadió Aziz, a quien el demonio le inspiró la idea de hacer un último esfuerzo.

—Hasta pronto, profesor Godbole —continuó Adela, repentinamente intranquila—. Es una pena que no le hayamos oído cantar.

—Puedo hacerlo ahora —replicó él, empezando acto seguido. Su tenue voz se alzó, produciendo un sonido tras otro. A veces parecía existir un ritmo; otras, el espejismo de una melodía occidental. Pero el oído, repetidamente desconcertado, perdía en seguida cualquier pista, limitándose a vagar entre un laberinto de sonidos, que no resultaban ásperos ni desagradables, pero tampoco inteligibles. Era la canción de un pájaro desconocido. Sólo los criados lo entendían. Empezaron a susurrar entre ellos. El hombre que recogía las castañas de agua salió desnudo del estanque, con la boca abierta en una expresión de deleite, mostrando la lengua carmesí. Los sonidos continuaron y cesaron al cabo de unos momentos tan inesperadamente como habían comenzado: dando la impresión de detenerse a mitad de un compás y apoyándose en la subdominante.

—Muchísimas gracias; ¿qué es lo que ha cantado? —preguntó Fielding.

—Se lo explicaré en detalle. Era un canto religioso. Yo me coloco en la posición de una pastora y le digo a Shri Krishna: «¡Ven! ¡Ven únicamente a mí!» El Dios se niega a venir. Creciendo en humildad le digo: «No vengas a mí únicamente. Multiplícate en un centenar de Krishnas, que vayan a cada una de mis cien compañeras, pero ven también a mí, ¡oh Señor del Universo!» Pero sigue negándose a venir. La canción está compuesta en una *raga* adecuada al momento en que se canta, la última hora de la tarde en este caso.

—Pero el Dios acude en alguna otra canción, ¿no es cierto? —dijo Mrs. Moore amablemente.

—No, no. Se niega a venir —repitió Godbole, sin entender quizá su pregunta—. Yo le digo, «Ven, ven, ven.» Pero no se molesta en hacerlo.

Los pasos de Ronny se perdieron a lo lejos y hubo un momento de silencio absoluto. Ni una onda que agitara el agua, ni una hoja que se

moviera.

Capítulo octavo

Aunque Miss Quested había tratado mucho a Ronny en Inglaterra, estaba convencida de que había sido una excelente idea hacerle una visita antes de decidir si se casaba con él. La India había desarrollado aspectos de su carácter que nunca despertaron la admiración de Adela. La autocomplacencia, la tendencia a la crítica, la falta de sutileza de Ronny se habían intensificado bajo el cielo del trópico; parecía más indiferente que en otros tiempos a lo que pasaba por la mente de los que le rodeaban y también más seguro de juzgar a los demás correctamente, o de que, si se equivocaba, su error carecía de importancia. Y cuando se le demostraba que, efectivamente, estaba equivocado, su actitud resultaba aún más desesperante; siempre daba a entender que no había necesidad de molestarse en probarlo. Las conclusiones de Adela nunca eran importantes, y sus razonamientos, aunque fuesen válidos, resultaban estériles. Siempre salía a relucir que Ronny tenía conocimientos especializados y ella no, y que sus vivencias no podían serle de utilidad porque no estaba capacitada para interpretarlas. Un colegio prestigioso, la Universidad de Londres, un año de preparar oposiciones, una determinada sucesión de puestos en cierta provincia, una caída de caballo y un episodio febril eran —a juicio de Ronny— la única preparación que permitía entender a los indios y a todos los que residían en el país; la única preparación al alcance de la

comprensión de Adela, claro está, ya que por encima se extendían aún zonas más elevadas de conocimiento, habitadas por los Callendar y los Turton, que no llevaban en el país un año, sino veinte, y cuyo instinto era sobrehumano. Ronny no se atribuía cualidades fuera de lo común; Adela hubiese preferido que lo hiciera. Eran los modestos alardes del funcionario inexperto, el «no soy perfecto, pero…», lo que le atacaba los nervios.

¡Qué groseramente se había comportado en casa de Mr. Fielding, estropeando la charla y marchándose a mitad de aquella canción tan singular! Mientras se alejaban con él en el *tttm-tnm*, Adela se sintió dominada por la irritación, sin darse cuenta de que en gran parte estaba enfadada consigo misma. Deseaba encontrar una oportunidad para reñir con él, y como también él estaba de mal humor y se hallaban los dos en la India, la oportunidad no tardó en presentarse. Casi antes de que salieran de los terrenos del Instituto, Adela oyó que Ronny le decía a su madre, sentada junto a él en el asiento delantero: «¿Qué era eso de las cuevas?», e inmediatamente abrió las hostilidades.

—Mrs. Moore, su maravilloso doctor se ha decidido por una excursión, en lugar de una fiesta en su casa; hemos de reunimos allí con él: usted, yo, Mr. Fielding, el profesor Godbole,,., exactamente las mismas personas que hoy.

—¿Dónde es allí? —preguntó Ronny.

—En las Cuevas de Marabar.

—¡Válgame Dios! —murmuró Ronny al cabo de un momento—. ¿Ha concretado los detalles?

—No, no lo ha hecho. Si hubieras hablado con él, podríamos haberlo arreglado.

Ronny movió la cabeza, riéndose.

—¿He dicho algo divertido?

—Me acordaba de cómo se le levantaba por detrás el cuello duro a vuestro excelente doctor.

—Creía que estábamos hablando de las cuevas.

—Es lo que estoy haciendo. Aziz iba exquisitamente vestido, desde el alfiler de la corbata a los botines, pero había olvidado ponerse el pasador

del cuello y ahí tienes al indio perfectamente caracterizado: descuido de los detalles; la negligencia básica que pone la raza de manifiesto. Lo mismo sucede con «reunirse» en las cuevas como si se tratara del reloj de Charing Cross, cuando están a millas de una estación y muy distantes entre sí.

—¿Las has visitado?

—No, pero estoy enterado de todo lo que se refiere a ellas, naturalmente.

—¡Naturalmente!

—¿También tú te has comprometido a participar en esa expedición, madre?

—Madre no se ha comprometido a nada —dijo Mrs. Moore, bastante de improviso—, incluyendo tener que ir a ese partido de polo. ¿Harás el favor de pasar primero por el bungalow y dejarme allí? Prefiero descansar.

—Déjame a mí también —dijo Adela—. Tampoco yo tengo ninguna gana de ver jugar al polo.

—Será mejor olvidarse del polo —dijo Ronny. Cansado y decepcionado, perdió por completo el control de sí mismo y añadió, alzando la voz y en tono conminatorio—: ¡No estoy dispuesto a que volváis a meteros en líos con los indios! Si queréis ver las Cuevas de Marabar, tendrán que ser ingleses los que organicen la excursión.

—No he oído hablar nunca de esas cuevas, no sé lo que son ni dónde están —dijo Mrs. Moore—, pero lo que realmente no soporto —añadió, golpeando con la mano el cojín que tenía al lado— son tantas peleas y malos humores.

Los dos jóvenes se sintieron avergonzados. Dejaron a Mrs. Moore en el bungalow y fueron juntos al partido de polo, pensando que era lo menos que podían hacer. Había pasado la crispación pero no el abatimiento; las tormentas rara vez limpian la atmósfera por completo. Miss Quested pensaba en su propia conducta, y no le gustaba en absoluto. En lugar de reflexionar sobre Ronny y sobre sí misma para llegar a una razonada conclusión acerca de su matrimonio, había comentado de manera casual —en el curso de una conversación sobre mangos y delante de extraños— que no tenía intención de quedarse en la India. Y eso quería decir que no iba a

casarse con Ronny; pero ¡qué manera de anunciarlo, qué comportamiento para una joven civilizada! Le debía una explicación a Ronny, pero desgraciadamente no había nada que explicar. Ya era demasiado tarde para una «conversación seria» tan de acuerdo con sus principios y su temperamento. No tenía sentido ponerse desagradable con él y formular quejas sobre su manera de ser en aquel momento, cuando ya caía la tarde… El partido de polo se jugaba en el Maidan, cerca de la entrada de la ciudad. El sol estaba muy cerca del horizonte y cada uno de los árboles encerraba una premonición de noche. Fueron a sentarse lejos del grupo de funcionarios y allí, convencida de que era una cuestión de justicia con Ronny y con ella misma, Adela se lanzó a decir unas cosas que aún no había asimilado:

—Me temo, Ronny, que debemos hablar seriamente.

—Estaba de muy mal humor y tengo que pedirte disculpas —fue su respuesta—. No era mi intención deciros ni a ti ni a mi madre lo que tenéis que hacer, pero, como es lógico, me ha molestado la manera que han tenido esos bengalíes de dejaros plantadas esta mañana y no quiero que sigan sucediendo cosas parecidas… —Lo que quiero decirte no tiene nada que ver con eso… —Quizá no, pero Aziz logrará que pase algo semejante con ese asunto de las cuevas. La invitación era una simple fórmula, lo noté en su tono de voz; es la manera que tienen los indios de ser amables.

—Quiero hablar contigo de algo muy diferente, que no tiene nada ver con las cuevas. —Adela estaba mirando la hierba descolorida—. He llegado finalmente a la conclusión de que no vamos a casarnos, querido.

Ronny se sintió muy dolido. Había oído decir a Aziz que Adela no se quedaría en la India, pero no hizo caso de la observación; porque nunca se le hubiera ocurrido que un indio sirviese de canal de comunicación entre dos ingleses. Dominándose, dijo amablemente:

—Nunca afirmaste que fuésemos a casarnos, querida; nunca has llegado a ligarte a mí; no tienes que preocuparte por eso.

Adela se sintió avergonzada. ¡Qué buena persona era Ronny en el fondo! Aunque se empeñaba en imponerle sus opiniones por la fuerza, no quería obligarla a aceptar el «compromiso» porque, al igual que ella, creía

en la suprema dignidad de las relaciones personales; no otro había sido el motivo de su mutua atracción cuando se conocieron, en el majestuoso escenario de la Región de los Lagos. El momento difícil había pasado, pero a Adela le parecía que habría tenido que ser más penoso y haber durado más. Ya no iba a casarse con Ronny, y todo daba la impresión de desvanecerse como un sueño.

—Me gustaría que analizáramos nuestra situación —dijo ella—; ¡es una cosa tan terriblemente importante! No debemos dar un paso en falso. Quisiera oír tu punto de vista acerca de mí: puede ayudarnos a los dos.

Pero Ronny se sentía desgraciado y poco comunicativo.

—No tengo mucha fe en ese tipo de análisis…, además, estoy muerto de cansancio con todo el trabajo extra que *mubarram* trae consigo, te ruego que me disculpes.

—Sólo quiero que todo quede absolutamente claro entre nosotros, y contestar a cualquier pregunta que quieras hacerme sobre mi conducta.

—No tengo nada que preguntarte. Te has limitado a hacer uso de tu derecho; era lógico que vinieras a verme en el ejercicio de mi profesión; se trataba de un plan excelente y, en cualquier caso, no sirve de nada hablar más de ello…, sólo conseguiríamos enfadarnos.

Ronny se sentía enojado y maltrecho; tenía demasiado orgullo para pedirle a Adela que recapacitase, pero no consideraba que la muchacha se hubiese portado mal, porque en todo lo relacionado con sus compatriotas Ronny era un hombre de mentalidad generosa.

—En ese caso imagino que no hay nada más que decir; es imperdonable que os haya causado tantas molestias a ti y a tu madre —dijo Miss Quested con voz llena de abatimiento, mirando desaprobadoramente el árbol bajo el cual se hallaban sentados. Un diminuto pájaro verde la estaba observando, tan brillante y tan pulcro que podría haber salido directamente de una tienda. Después de captar su atención, el pájaro cerró los ojos, dio un saltito y se preparó para acostarse. Algún pájaro silvestre de la India—. No, nada más —repitió Adela, pensando que uno de los dos tendría que haber dicho cosas apasionadas y profundas—. Nos estamos comportando de una manera terriblemente británica, pero supongo que no hay nada malo en ello.

—Supongo que no, puesto que somos británicos.

—En cualquier caso, no nos hemos peleado, ¿verdad, Ronny?

—Eso hubiera sido totalmente absurdo. ¿Por qué tendríamos que pelearnos?

—Supongo que seguiremos siendo amigos.

—Estoy completamente seguro.

—Claro.

Tan pronto como llegaron a esta conclusión, los dos se sintieron aliviados, alivio que en seguida se convirtió en ternura para desaparecer inmediatamente. La conciencia de su propia honradez les había ablandado y empezaban a sentirse muy solos e imprudentes. Eran unas experiencias determinadas y no su personalidad lo que les dividía; comparándolos con otros seres humanos, apenas existían diferencias entre los dos; de hecho, en relación con las personas que desde un punto de vista espacial estaban más cerca de ellos en aquel momento, podía decirse que eran prácticamente idénticos. El *bhil* sujetaba el caballo de un oficial, el euroasiático que conducía el automóvil del Nabab Bahadur, el Nabab Bahaduren persona, su disoluto nieto: ninguno de ellos hubiera examinado una situación difícil con tanta sinceridad y con tanta calma. El simple hecho de examinarla hacía disminuir las dificultades. Estaba claro que eran amigos y que lo seguirían siendo siempre.

—¿Sabes cómo se llama ese pájaro verde que está encima de nosotros? —preguntó Adela, acercando mucho su hombro al de Ronny.

—Papamoscas.

—No, Ronny; tiene rayas rojas en las alas.

—Cotorra —aventuró el otro.

—¡Cielo santo! No.

El pájaro en cuestión echó a volar, desapareciendo en la copa del árbol. Era una cosa sin importancia, peroles hubiera gustado identificarlo; de alguna manera hubiese supuesto un alivio para sus corazones. Pero en la India nada es identificable; el simple hecho de hacer una pregunta provoca su desaparición o su fusión con alguna otra cosa.

—McBryde tiene un libro con ilustraciones sobre pájaros —dijo Ronny muy desanimado—. No sé nada de pájaros; en realidad no sé nada fuera de mi trabajo profesional. Es una lástima.

—Lo mismo me sucede a mí. No sirvo para nada.

—¿Qué es lo que oigo? —gritó el Nabab Bahadur, alzando la voz lo más posible y logrando sobresaltarlos a los dos—. ¿Qué afirmación tan improbable es esa que acabo de oír? ¿Una dama inglesa inútil? No, en absoluto. —Rió afablemente, seguro, dentro de ciertos límites, de que su iniciativa sería bien recibida.

—¿Qué tal, Nabab Bahadur? ¿Viendo jugar al polo una vez más? —dijo Ronny sin mucho entusiasmo.

—Así es, *sahib* y así es.

—¿Qué tal está usted? —dijo Adela, tratando también de recobrarse. Acto seguido le tendió la mano. El anciano caballero dedujo de aquel gesto tan extravagante que Miss Quested era una recién llegada, pero no le dio mayor importancia. Las mujeres que enseñaban el rostro se convertían ya para él por ese simple acto en unos seres tan misteriosos que, en lugar de la suya propia, siempre aceptaba la valoración que de ellas nacían los ingleses. Quizá no fuesen inmortales, pero, en cualquier caso, no eran asunto suyo. Al ver al Magistrado Municipal a solas con una joven al atardecer, se había acercado a ellos con intención hospitalaria. Tenía un automóvil nuevo y quería ponerlo a su disposición; Mr. Heaslop decidiría si la oferta era aceptable.

Para entonces Ronny se sentía más bien avergonzado de su frialdad con Aziz y Godbole, y ahora se le presentaba una oportunidad de demostrar que era capaz de tratar a los indios consideradamente cuando se lo merecían. De manera que, con el mismo tono amistosamente triste que había utilizado para hablar del pájaro, le dijo a Adela:

—¿Te distraería dar un paseo de media hora?

—¿No tendríamos que volver al bungalow?

—¿Por qué?

Ronny se la quedó mirando.

—Quizá debiera ver a tu madre y hacer planes para el futuro.

—Como quieras, pero me parece que no corre tanta prisa.

—Permítanme que les lleve al bungalow después de dar un paseo muy breve —exclamó el anciano, dirigiéndose inmediatamente hacia el automóvil.

—Puede mostrarte algunos aspectos del país que se hallan fuera de mi alcance, y es un hombre verdaderamente leal. Pensaba que quizá te gustaría cambiar un poco.

Decidida a no causarle más problemas a Ronny, Adela aceptó, pero su deseo de ver la India estaba disminuyendo de repente. Había habido algo de artificial en su interés.

¿Cómo iban a sentarse en el coche? Era preciso que el elegante nieto del Nabab Bahadur se quedara en tierra. Su abuelo se colocó delante, porque no tenía la menor intención de ir al lado de una muchacha inglesa.

—A pesar de mis muchos años, estoy aprendiendo a conducir —dijo el anciano—. El ser humano puede aprender cualquier cosa si se lo propone. —Y previendo una nueva dificultad, añadió—: No es que conduzca yo. Voy haciéndole preguntas a mi chófer, y así aprendo el porqué de todo lo que hace antes de intentarlo. Con este método se evitan accidentes serios y, permítaseme decirlo, también otros ridículos, como el acontecido a uno de mis compatriotas durante la deliciosa recepción en el club inglés. ¡Nuestro buen Panna Lal! Confío, *sahib*, en que sus flores no sufrieran grandes daños.

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Inmediatamente se quedó dormido. Ronny le dijo al chófer que tomara la carretera de Marabar, porque la de Gangavati estaba en reparación, y volvió a acomodarse en el asiento junto a la dama que acababa de perder. Con un zumbido, el coche se lanzó carretera adelante, siguiendo un terraplén que dominaba diversos campos de melancólico aspecto. Árboles de mala calidad bordeaban la calzada; de hecho, todo el paisaje resultaba mediocre, creando la impresión de que el campo era demasiado extenso para que existiera en él algo destacable. Cada uno de sus elementos exclamaba en vano «Ven, ven». No había suficiente Dios para todos. Los

dos jóvenes hablaban en voz baja y se sentían insignificantes. Al irse haciendo de noche parecía como si la oscuridad saliera de la descarnada vegetación, cubriendo el campo por completo antes de desbordarse sobre la carretera. Al hacerse casi imposible distinguir las facciones de Ronny, Adela —como le sucedía siempre en estos casos— empezó a sentir un mayor respeto por los rasgos positivos de su carácter. Debido a una sacudida, su mano tocó la de él, y uno de esos estremecimientos tan frecuentes en el reino animal pasó de uno a otro, anunciando que todas sus dificultades no eran más que una pelea de enamorados. Los dos tenían demasiado orgullo para aumentar la presión, pero tampoco retiraron la mano y descendió sobre ellos una falsa unanimidad, tan localizada y transitoria como el resplandor de una luciérnaga. Desaparecería al cabo de un momento, quizá para reaparecer más tarde, porque sólo la oscuridad es duradera. Y la noche que les rodeaba, aunque daba la impresión de ser absoluta, no suponía tampoco más que una falsa unidad, modificada por las estrellas y la claridad diurna que aún se filtraba por los bordes de la tierra.

De pronto tuvieron que agarrarse con fuerza…, un golpe, un salto, un giro muy brusco, dos ruedas que perdían contacto con la carretera, frenazo violento, choque con un árbol en el borde del terraplén, inmovilidad total. Un accidente de poca importancia. Nadie estaba herido. El Nabab Bahadur se despertó. En seguida se puso a gritar en árabe y a mesarse violentamente la barba.

—¿Se ha averiado el automóvil? —preguntó Ronny después de la pausa momentánea que se permitía a sí mismo antes de hacerse cargo de una situación.

El chófer euroasiático, con tendencia al nerviosismo, se repuso al oír su voz, y, sintiéndose inglés de pies a cabeza, replicó: —Denme cinco minutos y les llevaré a donde haga falta.

—¿Estás asustada, Adela? —dijo Ronny, retirando la mano.

—Ni pizca.

—Considero que no asustarse es el colmo de la insensatez —exclamó el Nabab Bahadur de manera bastante brusca.

—Bien, ya ha pasado; las lágrimas no sirven para nada —dijo Ronny, apeándose—. Hemos tenido suerte, tropezando con ese árbol.

—Ha pasado todo…; sí, el peligro ha quedado atrás; fumemos, hagamos lo que nos apetezca. Sí…, divirtámonos… Dios misericordioso…

Imperceptiblemente, las palabras del Nabab se transformaron en frases árabes.

—No ha sido el puente. El coche patinó.

—No hemos patinado —dijo Adela, que había visto la causa del accidente y creía que todos los demás estaban en el mismo caso—. Hemos tropezado con un animal.

El anciano dejó escapar un grito lastimero; su terror resultaba desproporcionado y ridículo.

—¿Un animal?

—Un animal bastante grande salió corriendo de la oscuridad por la derecha y se precipitó contra nosotros.

—¡Caramba, pues tiene razón! —exclamó Ronny—. Está saltada la pintura.

—¡Caramba, su señora tiene razón! —repitió el euroasiático, sirviendo de eco.

Había una abolladura junto a los goznes de la puerta, y costaba trabajo abrirla.

—Claro que la tengo. He visto un lomo peludo con toda claridad.

—¿Qué crees que era?

—Sé tan poco de animales como de pájaros…, demasiado grande para tratarse de una cabra.

—Exacto —dijo el anciano—; demasiado grande para una cabra.

—Vamos a intentar averiguarlo; busquemos las huellas.

—Exacto; lo que necesitan es esta linterna.

Los dos ingleses retrocedieron unos cuantos pasos, sumergiéndose en la oscuridad, unidos y felices. Gracias a su juventud y educación, el accidente no les había afectado en absoluto. Siguiendo las huellas de los neumáticos llegaron al origen del problema, nada más cruzar el puente; probablemente el animal había subido desde el *nullah*. Las marcas de las cubiertas

avanzaban uniforme y suavemente: cintas divididas en rombos que se distinguían con gran claridad; luego, todo era confusión. Había intervenido sin duda alguna fuerza exterior, pero quedaban demasiadas señales en la carretera para que una huella determinada resultara legible, y la linterna creaba tales contrastes de luz y sombra que no eran capaces de interpretar lo que revelaba. Adela, además, con la excitación, se arrodilló y arrastró la falda por el suelo, hasta que fue ella, más que ninguna otra cosa, quien dio la impresión de haber atacado el automóvil. El incidente resultó ser un gran alivio para los dos. Olvidaron sus fracasadas relaciones personales y se sintieron audaces mientras mezclaban, unas con otras, las huellas sobre el polvo.

—Creo que era un búfalo —gritó Adela a su anfitrión, que no les había acompañado.

—Exactamente.

—A no ser que se tratara de una hiena. A Ronny le pareció acertada esta última conjetura. Las hienas merodean por los *nullahs* y los faros de los automóviles las deslumbran.

—Excelente, una hiena —dijo el indio, irónico e irritado al mismo tiempo, y haciendo un gesto en dirección a la noche—. ¡Mr. Harris!

—Un momento. Denme diez minutos más.

—El *sabib* dice que ha sido una hiena.

—Deje usted tranquilo a Mr. Harris. Nos ha evitado un choque mucho más desagradable. ¡Lo ha hecho usted muy bien, Harris!

—Un choque, *sabib*, que no se habría producido si, tal como le indiqué, Mr. Harris nos hubiese llevado del lado de Gangavati en lugar de hacia Marabar.

—La culpa ha sido mía. Le dije que viniera en esta dirección porque la carretera es mejor. Mr. Lesley ha arreglado todo el trayecto hasta las colinas.

—Ah, ahora empiezo a comprender.

Dando la impresión de recobrarse, el Nabab Bahadur se disculpó lenta y detalladamente por lo sucedido.

—No tiene importancia —murmuró Ronny, pero las disculpas eran de rigor y tendrían que habérsele ofrecido antes; que los ingleses conserven la calma en los momentos críticos no debe considerarse como prueba de su insignificancia. El Nabab Bahadur no había superado la prueba demasiado satisfactoriamente.

En aquel momento apareció un automóvil de grandes proporciones que se acercaba en dirección opuesta. Ronny avanzó unos pasos carretera adelante, y con autoridad en la voz y en el gesto lo izo detenerse. Sobre el capó llevaba la inscripción «Estado de Mudkul». En su interior, toda vivacidad y cordialidad, se hallaba Miss Derek.

—Mr. Heaslop, Miss Quested, ¿por qué detienen ustedes a una inocente criatura del sexo femenino?

—Hemos tenido una avería.

—¡Qué horror!

—¡Hemos atropellado a una hiena!

—¡Qué cosa más desagradable!

—¿Podría usted llevarnos?

—Claro que sí.

—Lléveme también a mí —dijo el Nabab Bahadur.

—¡Eh! ¿Y qué hago yo? —exclamó Mr. Harris.

—Pero, vamos a ver, ¿qué es todo esto? No soy un ómnibus —dijo Miss Derek con aire decidido—. Ya llevo conmigo un armonio y dos perros. Dejaré subir a tres personas si una se sienta delante y cuida de un perro dogo. Pero sólo a tres.

—Yo me sentaré delante —dijo el Nabab Bahadur.

—Pues súbase de una vez; no tengo ni idea de quién es usted.

—¡Eh! ¿Qué va a pasar con mi cena? No se me puede dejar aquí solo toda la noche —intervino el chófer agresivamente, esforzándose por parecer un europeo y sentirse como tal.

Aún llevaba puesto el casco a pesar de la oscuridad, y su rostro, al que la raza dominante había aportado muy poco, aparte de unos dientes cariados, se asomaba patéticamente por debajo de él, y parecía decir: «¿Qué está pasando? No me atormenten entre todos, blancos y gentes de color.

Aquí me tienen, atrapado en esta maldita India igual que ustedes, y merezco que me encuentren mejor acomodo.»

—Nussu le traerá la cena en bicicleta —dijo el Nabab Bahadur, que había recobrado su dignidad habitual—. Haré que salga con la mayor rapidez posible. Mientras tanto, arregle usted mi automóvil.

Mientras se alejaban a toda velocidad, Mr. Harris, después de lanzarles una mirada llena de reproches, se sentó en el suelo cruzándose de piernas. Siempre se sentía cohibido cuando ingleses e indios estaban presentes al mismo tiempo, porque no sabía a cuál de los dos grupos pertenecía. Durante un rato se sintió molesto por las tendencias opuestas que circulaban por su sangre, pero luego se mezclaron de nuevo, y Mr. Harris volvió a pertenecerse únicamente a sí mismo.

Pero Miss Derek estaba de un humor excelente. Había logrado robar el automóvil de Mudkul. Su maharajá se enfadaría muchísimo, pero no le importaba; podía despedirla si quería.

—No tengo por qué permitir que estas personas se aprovechen de mí —dijo—. Si no tirara bien fuerte por mi lado no habría conseguido absolutamente nada. ¡Ese pobre estúpido no siente el menor interés por el coche! Sin duda dice mucho en favor de su Estado que se me vea con él en Chandrapore durante mis vacaciones. El maharajá debería verlo así. Y en cualquier caso no le va a quedar otro remedio. Mi maharaní es diferente…, realmente encantadora. Ese es su foxterrier, pobrecillo. Los he pescado a los dos, junto con el chófer. Imagínense, ¡llevar perros a una Conferencia de Jefes! Aunque quizá sea tan sensato como llevar a los mismos jefes. —Se rió a carcajada»—. El armonio…, reconozco que el armonio ha sido una pequeña equivocación por mi parte. Creo que he salido perdiendo con el asunto del armonio. Mi intención era que se quedara en el tren. ¡Señor, Señor!

Ronny rió moderadamente. No era partidario de que lo» ingleses trabajaran en los estados nativos, donde obtenían cierto grado de influencia personal, pero a costa del prestigio de todos los demás! Los divertidos éxitos de una persona que trabaja por su cuenta no sirven de nada a un

administrador, y le dijo a Miss Derek que acabaría superando a los indios en su propio juego si seguía mucho tiempo haciendo aquello.

—Siempre me despiden antes de que suceda eso, y entonces consigo otro empleo. Toda la India está infestada de maharanís y de *ranis* y de *begums*, deseosas de contratar a gente como yo.

—¿Es eso cierto? No tenía la menor idea.

—¿Cómo iba usted a tenerla, Mr. Heaslop? ¿Qué podría saber él sobre maharanís, Miss Quested? Nada. Al menos eso esperaría yo.

—Tengo entendido que esas personas de tan alto rango no resultan demasiado interesantes —dijo Adela con la mayor calma posible, consciente de que no le gustaba el tono de su joven compatriota. En la oscuridad su mano tocó de nuevo la de Ronny, y al estremecimiento animal se añadió ahora la coincidencia de opiniones.

—Ah, en eso se equivoca usted. No tienen precio.

—Yo no me atrevería a decir que se equivoca —intervino el Nabab Bahadur, desde su situación de aislamiento en el asiento delantero al que se había visto relegado—. En un estado nativo, en un estado hindú, la esposa del soberano puede ser sin duda una dama extraordinaria, y nadie piense por un momento que yo estoy insinuando algo contra la reputación de Su Alteza la Maharaní de Mudkul. Pero me temo que le falte educación, me temo que sea supersticiosa. En realidad, ¿cómo podría ser de otra manera? ¿Qué oportunidades para educarse ha tenido una señora como ella? ¡La superstición es una cosa terrible, terrible! ¡Es el gran defecto de nuestro carácter indio! —Y, como para subrayar su crítica, en un altozano, hacia la derecha, aparecieron las luces de la zona residencial de los ingleses. El Nabab Bahadur se fue haciendo más parlanchín por momentos—. La obligación de todos y cada uno de los ciudadanos es desprenderse de la superstición y, aunque tengo muy poca experiencia de estados hindúes y ninguna de Mudkul en particular (imagino que a su soberano sólo le corresponde una salva de ordenanza de once cañonazos), no puedo creer que hayan obtenido tan buenos resultados como en la India británica, donde vemos extenderse la razón y el orden en todas direcciones, como un flujo saludable.

—¡Caray! —dijo Miss Derek.

Sin acobardarse ante aquella exclamación, el anciano siguió adelante. Se le había soltado la lengua y sentía la necesidad de hacer varias observaciones. Deseaba respaldar el comentario de Miss Quested acerca de lo poco interesantes que eran las personas de alto rango, porque él mismo era más importante que muchos gobernantes independientes; al mismo tiempo, no debía recordar ni informar a la señorita en cuestión de que él era una persona importante, para que no tuviera la impresión de haber cometido una descortesía. Tal era la base de su parlamento; entrelazada con ello estaba su gratitud hacia Miss Derek por haberle dejado subir al coche, su buena disposición para llevar en brazos un perro repulsivo, y su pesar, en términos generales, por los inconvenientes que había causado a la raza humana en el transcurso de la tarde. También quería que se le permitiera apearse cerca de la ciudad para localizar a su lavandero y ver qué nueva fechoría estaba a punto de cometer su nieto. Mientras tejía todas estas ansiedades con una sola cuerda, el Nabab Bahadur sospechaba que su público no le escuchaba con interés, y que el Magistrado Municipal estaba acariciando a las dos jóvenes aprovechándose de la protección que le ofrecía el armonio, pero la buena educación le impulsaba a continuar; para el Nabab no tenía importancia que se aburrieran, ya que él personalmente ignoraba en qué consiste el aburrimiento, ni tampoco le importaba que fueran licenciosos, porque Dios ha creado todas las razas para que sean distintas. El accidente pertenecía al pasado, y su vida, uniformemente útil, distinguida y feliz, seguía su curso habitual y se expresaba en raudales de palabras bien escogidas.

Cuando el viejo géiser les dejó, Ronny no hizo ninguna observación, dedicándose en cambio a hablar sobre el partido de polo; Turton le había enseñado que era mejor no hablar de un hombre inmediatamente, y reservó lo que tenía que decir sobre el Nabab para más tarde. Después de hacer un gesto de adiós, su mano tocó nuevamente la de Adela; ella se la acarició sin reservas, él respondió, y sin duda la firme presión por ambas partes quería decir algo. Se miraron al llegar al bungalow porque Mrs. Moore estaba

dentro. Le correspondía hablar a Miss Quested, que dijo con cierto nerviosismo:

—Ronny, quisiera retirar lo que he dicho en el Maidan.

El otro asintió y, en consecuencia, quedaron comprometidos para casarse.

Ninguno de los dos había previsto aquel resultado. Adela tenía intención de volver a su anterior situación de incertidumbre —más importante y refinada—, pero había dejado pasar el momento oportuno y ahora estaba ya fuera de su alcance. A diferencia del pájaro verde o del animal peludo, Miss Quested había quedado clasificada. Adela se sintió humillada de nuevo, porque no le gustaban las etiquetas y pensaba además que en aquel momento debería haberse producido otra escena entre su pretendiente y ella: algo dramático y de considerable duración. Ronny estaba contentó en Jugar de preocupado; sorprendido, eso sí, pero no tenía nada que decir en realidad. ¿Qué se podía decir? Casarse o no casarse, esa era la cuestión, y Adela y él la habían resuelto afirmativa—.

—Ven, vamos a contárselo todo a mi madre —dijo Ronny, abriendo la puerta de cinc con perforaciones que protegía el bungalow de los enjambres de criaturas aladas. El ruido despertó a Mrs. Moore. Había estado soñando con sus hijos ausentes a los que tan (pocas veces mencionaba, Ralph y Stella, y al principio no captó de qué se trataba. También Mrs. Moore se había acostumbrado a retrasar las cosas sesudamente, y se sintió alarmada al ver que la espera llegaba a su término.

Terminada la notificación, Ronny hizo una observación sincera y llena de buena voluntad.

—Escuchadme las dos: si queréis ver la India podéis hacerlo como os apetezca… Sé que más bien he hecho el ridículo en casa de Fielding, pero… ahora ya es diferente. No estaba completamente seguro de mí mismo.

«Está claro que los deberes que me trajeron aquí han concluido; ya no quiero ver la India, lo que necesito es el pasaje de vuelta», pensó Mrs. Moore. Se recordó a sí misma todo lo que significa un matrimonio feliz, y pensó en sus dos felices matrimonios, uno de los cuales había producido a

Ronny, También los padres de Adela habían sido dichosos en su matrimonio, y era una cosa excelente ver repetirse el acontecimiento en la joven generación. ¡Una y otra vez! El número de uniones de aquel tipo aumentaría sin duda a medida que se extendiera la educación y las personas tuvieran ideales más elevados y caracteres más firmes. Pero la visita al Instituto la había fatigado, le dolían los pies, Mr. Fielding había andado mucho y demasiado de prisa, los dos jóvenes habían conseguido irritarla en el *tum-tum*, haciéndole suponer que estaban a punto de romper sus relaciones, y aunque ahora todo estaba arreglado, Mrs. Moore no era capaz de hablar del vínculo matrimonial o de cualquier otra cosa con el debido entusiasmo. Ronny había logrado lo que quería, Vella tenía que volver a casa y ayudar a los otros, si es que lo deseaban. Mrs. Moore había pasado la edad de contraer matrimonio, feliz o desgraciado; su función era ayudar a otros, su recompensa que se la considerase favorablemente dispuesta. Las señoras de edad avanzada no deben tener aspiraciones más altas.

Cenaron solos. Hablaron mucho del futuro en un agradable clima de afecto y confianza. Después comentaron los pasados acontecimientos y Ronny analizó la jornada desde su personal punto de vista. Su día había sido diferente del de las mujeres, porgue mientras ellas se divertían o pensaban él había estado trabajando. Se acercaba mubarram y, como de costumbre, los mahometanos de Chandrapore estaban construyendo torres de papel demasiado altas para pasar bajo las ramas de cierta higuera de las pagodas. Ya se sabía lo que sucedería después; la torre se atascaría, un mahometano se subiría a la higuera y cortaría la rama, los hindúes protestarían, se produciría un alboroto de carácter religioso y sólo Dios sabe qué más, y quizás hasta fuera necesario pedir tropas. Se habían constituido delegaciones y formado Comités de Conciliación bajo los auspicios de Turton, y todo el trabajo ordinario de Chandrapore estaba detenido. ¿Se debía cambiar el recorrido de la procesión o hacer torres más bajas? Los mahometanos ofrecían la primera solución, mientras que los hindúes insistían en la segunda. El administrador se inclinaba por estos últimos, hasta que empezó a sospechar que habían encorvado el árbol artificialmente para acercarlo al suelo. Los hindúes aseguraban que se combaba

espontáneamente. Medidas, planos, una visita oficial al lugar. Pero Ronny no estaba descontento con su día, porque probaba que los británicos hacían falta en la India; sin ellos se produciría sin duda derramamiento de sangre. Su voz adquirió de nuevo un tono de autocomplacencia; él no estaba allí para ser amable, sino para mantener la paz, y ahora que Adela le había prometido ser su esposa estaba seguro de que lo entendería.

—¿Qué piensa el anciano caballero que nos ha invitado a pasear en coche? —preguntó Adela, y su tono indiferente era exactamente el que Ronny deseaba.

—Nuestro anciano caballero se muestra servicial y carente de veleidades, como es siempre el caso cuando se trata de asuntos públicos. Has tenido ocasión de conocer a nuestro indio ejemplar.

—¿Lo dices en serio?

—Me temo que sí. Hasta los mejores son increíbles, ¿no es cierto? Les pasa a todos lo mismo: antes o después se les olvida ponerse el pasador del cuello. Hoy te has relacionado con tres tipos diferentes de indios: los Bhattacharya, Aziz y el Nabab, y no es una simple coincidencia que los tres te hayan defraudado.

—A mí me gusta Aziz, Aziz es de verdad amigo mío —intervino Mrs. Moore.

—Cuando un animal choca con nuestro coche, el Nabab pierde la cabeza, abandona a su infeliz chófer, se mete casi a la fuerza en el automóvil de Miss Derek…, no tiene gran importancia, pero son cosas que un hombre blanco no hubiera hecho.

—¿Qué animal?

—Hemos tenido un accidente sin importancia en la carretera de Marabar. Adela cree que se trataba de una hiena.

—¿Un accidente? —exclamó Mrs. Moore.

—Nada importante; ningún herido. Nuestro excelente anfitrión se despertó muy alarmado de sus sueños, dio la impresión de pensar que la culpa era nuestra y no hizo otra cosa que repetir «exactamente, exactamente», como una cantinela.

Mrs. Moore se estremeció, «¡Un fantasma!» Pero la idea del fantasma apenas pasó de sus labios. Los jóvenes no la recogieron, ocupados como estaban en revisar sus propios puntos de vista, y, carente de apoyo, pereció o fue reabsorbida por esa parte del cerebro que raras veces llega a expresarse.

—Sí, nada delictivo —resumió Ronny—, pero así son los indios, y esa es una de las razones de que no los admitamos en nuestros clubs y de que me sorprenda que una chica como Miss Derek trabaje para ellos… Pero tengo que seguir con mi trabajo. ¡Krishna!

Krishna era el *peón* que debería haberle traído las carpetas de documentos que estaban en su despacho. No había aparecido y se produjo un gran revuelo. Ronny se encolerizó, gritó, aulló, y sólo un observador experimentado habría sido capaz de notar que el Magistrado Municipal no estaba realmente enfadado ni necesitaba las carpetas, y que únicamente organizaba un revuelo porque era esa la costumbre. Los criados, dándose cuenta con toda claridad de lo que sucedía, se dedicaron a correr lentamente en círculos, con quinqués en las manos. Krishna, la tierra, y Krishna, las estrellas, contestaron a sus llamadas, hasta que el inglés se calmó con los ecos de sus voces, impuso una multa de ocho anas al *peón* ausente y se sentó en la habitación vecina a dedicarse al trabajo atrasado.

—Adela, ¿querrías hacer un solitario con tu futura suegra, o te parece una actividad demasiado insípida? —dijo Mrs. Moore.

—Me gustaría jugar… No estoy nada nerviosa… Sólo contenta de que por fin lo hayamos arreglado, aunque no noto que se haya producido ningún cambio importante. Todavía seguimos siendo las mismas tres personas.

—Esa es la sensación más conveniente que puedes tener. Mrs. Moore sirvió la primera mano de cartas.

—Imagino que sí —dijo la muchacha pensativamente.

—En casa de Mr. Fielding me temí que hubieras tomado la decisión contraria…; dama de trébol sobre rey de diamante—. Charlaron sin prisas sobre el juego. Al cabo de un rato Adela dijo:

—Me oyó usted decirles a Aziz y a Godbole que no me iba a quedar en el país. No era cierto, así que ¿por qué lo dije? Tengo la impresión de que

no he sido… suficientemente sincera, o que no he puesto suficiente atención, o algo parecido. Es como si hubiera desquiciado todas las cosas. Usted ha sido muy buena conmigo, y yo quería portarme bien cuando nos embarcamos, pero por alguna razón no lo he hecho… Mrs. Moore, si una no es totalmente honesta, ¿qué sentido tiene la existencia? Mrs. Moore siguió poniendo las cartas sobre la mesa. Las palabras de Adela resultaban oscuras, pero la anciana entendía el desasosiego que las producía. Ella misma lo había experimentado dos veces durante sus propios compromisos matrimoniales: aquel vago arrepentimiento y aquellas dudas. Después todo resultó bien, como sin duda sucedería también en este caso; el matrimonio logra enderezar todas las cosas.

—Yo no me preocuparía —dijo Mrs. Moore—. Se debe en parte a estar en un ambiente extraño; tú y yo nos ocupamos de naderías en lugar de atender a lo importante; somos lo que la gente de aquí llama «nuevas».

—¿Quiere decir que mis preocupaciones están mezcladas con la India?

—Las de la India…

Mrs. Moore se detuvo.

—¿Por qué dijo usted que había sido un fantasma?

—¿Un fantasma?

—El animal que chocó con nosotros. ¿No dijo usted «¡Un fantasma!» como de pasada?

—He debido de decirlo sin pensar.

—Estoy casi segura de que era una hiena.

—Es lo más probable.

Y así continuaron haciendo el solitario. Abajo, en Chandrapore, el Nabab Bahadur aguardaba la llegada de su coche. Estaba sentado detrás de su casa de la ciudad (un pequeño edificio sin muebles en el que entraba raras veces), en el centro de la pequeña corte que siempre se improvisa alrededor de los indios de alta posición. De cuando en cuando, como si los turbantes fueran el lógico producto de la oscuridad, había alguno que avanzaba hasta situarse delante del anciano, y después de inclinarse se retiraba. El Nabab Bahadur estaba preocupado y su dicción era la adecuada para desarrollar un tema religioso. Nueve años antes, la primera vez que

había tenido un automóvil, atropello a un borracho, matándolo, y aquel hombre había estado esperándole desde entonces. El Nabab Bahadur era inocente ante Dios y ante la Justicia y había pagado el doble de la indemnización exigida; pero no servía de nada, el hombre seguía esperando, de una forma inexpresable, muy cerca del escenario de su muerte. Ni los ingleses ni el chófer estaban al corriente de esto; era un secreto racial que se comunicaba más por la sangre que por la palabra. El Nabab hablaba ahora horrorizado de las especiales circunstancias que ennegrecían el suceso: había expuesto a otros al peligro; había arriesgado las vidas de dos inocentes y respetados huéspedes.

—¿Qué importancia tendría que yo hubiese muerto? —repetía—. Antes o después tiene que suceder, pero los que habían puesto en mí su confianza…

Los presentes se estremecieron e invocaron la misericordia de Dios. Sólo Aziz no participaba de aquellos sentimientos, porque su experiencia personal le hacía disentir: ¿no había sido por despreciar a los fantasmas como había llegado a conocer a Mrs. Moore?

—Sabes muy bien, Nureddin —le susurró al nieto del Nabab (un joven afeminado al que veía muy raras veces y siempre le caía bien, pero al que olvidaba acto seguido)—, sabes muy bien, mi querido amigo, que los musulmanes tenemos que librarnos de esas supersticiones, o de lo contrario la India no progresará nunca. ¿Cuánto tiempo seguiré aún oyendo hablar del cerdo salvaje de la carretera de Marabar? —Nureddin bajó la vista. Aziz continuó—: Tu abuelo pertenece a otra generación y yo respeto y quiero a ese anciano caballero, como sabes muy bien. No digo nada en contra suya, tan sólo que en nuestro caso estaría mal, porque nosotros somos jóvenes. Quiero que me prometas, Nureddin, ¿me estás escuchando?, que no creerás en los malos espíritus y que si muero (porque mi salud empeora de día en día) educarás a mis tres hijos para que tampoco crean en ellos.

Nureddin sonrió y sus bonitos labios se prepararon a dar una respuesta adecuada, pero antes de que las palabras salieran de su boca llegó el automóvil, y su abuelo se lo llevó consigo.

En la zona residencial de los ingleses el solitario todavía se prolongó después de esto. Mrs. Moore siguió murmurando: «Diez de diamante sobre dama de trébol», Miss Quested continuó ayudándola | intercalando entre las complicaciones del juego detalles sobre la hiena, el compromiso matrimonial, la maharaní de Mudkul, los Bhattacharya y el día en general, cuya áspera superficie reseca adquiría, al irse alejando, una silueta definida, como podría hacerlo la misma India si fuera posible verla desde la luna. Al cabo de un rato las dos jugadoras se fueron a la cama, pero no sin que antes otras personas se hubieran despertado en otros sitios, personas cuyas emociones no podían compartir y cuya existencia ignoraban. Nunca totalmente en calma, nunca perfectamente oscura, la noche se iba desgastando, diferenciándose de otras noches por dos o tres ráfagas de viento que parecían caer perpendicularmente desde el cielo para rebotar inmediatamente, duras y compactas, sin dejar tras de sí ni un soplo de frescor: se acercaba la estación cálida.

Capítulo noveno

Como había predicho, Aziz se puso enfermo, aunque sólo levemente enfermo. Tres días después yacía en cama en su bungalow, fingiendo estar muy enfermo. No tenía más que un poco de fiebre y la habría ignorado si hubiera tenido algo importante que hacer en el hospital. De vez en cuando gemía y pensaba que iba a morirse, pero no lo pensaba durante mucho tiempo y la menor cosa le distraía. Era domingo, un día siempre muy ambiguo en Oriente y una excusa para holgazanear. Estuvo oyendo repicar campanas mientras dormitaba: las de la capilla en la zona residencial de los funcionarios ingleses y las de la misión más allá del matadero, Campanas diferentes y que repicaban con propósitos distintos, porque las primeras llamaban con firmeza a la India inglesa y las segundas a toda la humanidad, pero débilmente. Aziz no tenía nada en contra de las primeras; las otras las ignoraba, consciente de su ineficacia. El anciano Mr. Graysford y el joven Mr. Sorley lograban conversos durante las épocas de carestía porque distribuían alimentos; pero cuando llegaban tiempos mejores se quedaban otra vez solos como era lógico y, aunque se sorprendían e irritaban siempre que les sucedía esto, nunca llegaban a aprender la lección. «Ningún inglés nos entiende, con la excepción de Mr. Fielding —pensó Aziz—; pero ¿cómo es posible que vuelva a verle? Si entrara en esta habitación me moriría de vergüenza.» Llamó a Hassan para que limpiara, pero Hassan, que

estaba comprobando si las moneas de su soldada eran falsas o no mediante el procedimiento de dejarlas caer sobre el escalón del porche, descubrió que podía no oírle; le oyó y no le oyó, de la misma manera que Aziz había llamado y no había llamado. «Eso es la India…, así somos nosotros…, no hace falta ir más lejos…» Aziz volvió a quedarse medio dormido y sus pensamientos vagaron sobre la multiforme superficie de la vida.

Gradualmente se fueron centrando en un determinado punto: la Sima Sin Fondo, según los misioneros; Aziz, sin embargo, no le daba más importancia que a un simple hoyo. Sí, le apetecía pasar una velada con unas cuantas chicas, con canciones y todo lo demás, una exaltación no muy bien definida y que culminaría en voluptuosidad. Sí, eso era lo que necesitaba. ¿Cómo se podría arreglar? Si el Mayor Callendar fuese indio, se acordaría de lo que son los jóvenes y le concedería un permiso para irse dos o tres días a Calcuta sin hacer preguntas. Pero el Mayor Callendar debía suponer que sus subordinados eran de piedra o que recurrirían a los bazares de Chandrapore: dos posibilidades igualmente odiosas. Tan sólo Mr. Fielding…

—¡Hassan!

El criado acudió corriendo.

—Mira esas moscas, hermano.

Y Aziz señaló la horrible masa que colgaba del techo. El núcleo era un cable que había sido instalado en homenaje a la electricidad.

La electricidad no había hecho ningún caso, y una colonia de moscas había acudido en su lugar, ennegreciendo la superficie del cable con sus cuerpos.

—Son moscas, *huzoor*.

—Bien, de acuerdo, eso es lo que son, excelente, pero ¿por qué te he llamado?

—Para hacer que se vayan a otro sitio —dijo Hassan, tras penosa meditación.

—Se van a otro sitio, pero siempre vuelven.

—Sí, *huzoor*.

—Tienes que encontrar un remedio contra las moscas; para eso eres mi criado —dijo Aziz amablemente.

Hassan llamaría al niño de los recados para que pidiera prestada la escalera de mano en casa de Mahmoud Ali; le ordenaría al cocinero que encendiera el hornillo de petróleo y que calentara agua; luego el mismo Hassan subiría los travesaños de la escalera con una olla en las manos y sumergiría en su interior el extremo del cable.

—Bien, muy bien. Entonces, ¿qué es lo que tienes que hacer?

—Matar las moscas.

—Excelente. Hazlo.

Hassan se retiró, con el plan casi asimilado, y empezó a buscar al chico de los recados. Al no encontrarlo, sus pasos se hicieron más lentos y regresó disimuladamente a su sitio en el porche, pero no siguió examinando sus rupias, no fuera que su amo oyera el tintineo. Las campanas dominicales repicaban aún; el Oriente había vuelto al Oriente pasando por las afueras de Londres y se había convertido en algo ridículo durante el rodeo. Aziz siguió pensando en mujeres hermosas. En este punto el joven médico se mostraba directo y obstinado, aunque no brutal. Había aprendido todo lo necesario sobre su propia constitución muchos años atrás, gracias al sistema social dentro del que había nacido, y cuando fue a estudiar Medicina le habían repelido la pedantería y las alharacas con que Europa clasifica los Hechos relativos al sexo. La ciencia parecía analizarlo todo desde un punto de vista equivocado, y no le sirvió para interpretar sus experiencias cuando las encontró en un libro de texto alemán, porque al estar allí dejaban de ser sus experiencias. Lo que su padre o su madre le habían dicho o lo que había aprendido de los criados era el tipo de información que le resultaba útil y que, cuando la ocasión se presentaba, transmitía a otras personas.

Pero no podía deshonrar a sus hijos con alguna estúpida aventura. ¿Qué sucedería si se corriese la voz de que Aziz no era una persona respetable? También tenía que considerar su posición profesional, prescindiendo de lo que pensara el Mayor Callendar. Aziz defendía el decoro, pero sin atribuirle una aureola moral y en esto, básicamente, se diferenciaba de un inglés. Sus reglas de comportamiento sólo tenían valor social. No hay nada de malo en

engañar a la sociedad mientras ella no nos descubra, porque sólo se la perjudica cuando nos descubre; la sociedad no es como un amigo o como Dios, a quienes se ofende con la simple existencia de la infidelidad. Sin la menor duda sobre este punto, Aziz meditaba sobre el tipo de mentira que debería contar para marcharse a Calcuta, y había pensado ya en un conocido que podía mandarle un telegrama y una carta para enseñar al Mayor Callendar, cuando se oyó el ruido de un vehículo que se detenía delante de su casa. Alguien venía a interesarse por su salud. La idea de la compasión ajena hizo que le aumentara la fiebre y con un gemido sincero se arrebujó en el edredón.

—Mi querido Aziz, estamos muy preocupados —dijo la voz de Hamidullah.

Uno, dos, tres, cuatro golpes, a medida que los visitantes se sentaban sobre la cama.

—El que un médico se ponga enfermo, es un asunto muy serio —dijo la voz de Mr. Syea Mohammed, el ingeniero ayudante.

—Igualmente importante es que enferme un ingeniero —dijo la voz de Mr. Haq, inspector de Policía.

—Sí, claro, somos personas muy importantes, como demuestran nuestros salarios.

—El doctor Aziz estuvo tomando el té con nuestro director el jueves por la tarde —dijo con voz aflautada Rafi, el sobrino del ingeniero—. El profesor Godbole, que también asistió, ha enfermado igualmente, lo que parece una cosa bastante extraña, ¿no es cierto?

Llamas de sospecha se alzaron al instante en el pecho de todos los presentes.

—¡Mentira! —exclamó Hamidullah, con voz autoritaria, apagándolas.

—Una mentira, sin duda alguna —repitieron los otros, haciéndole eco, muy avergonzados de sí mismos.

El malvado estudiante, al fracasar en su intento de iniciar un escándalo, perdió confianza en sí mismo y se puso en píe, apoyando la espalda contra la pared.

—¿Está enfermo el profesor Godbole? —quiso saber Aziz al tomar conciencia de la noticia—. Lo siento de verdad. —Su rostro, inteligente y con expresión compasiva, apareció por encima de los pliegues del edredón, de un intenso color carmesí—. ¿Cómo están ustedes, Mr. Syed y Mr. Haq? ¡Qué amabilidad la suya al interesarse por mi salud! ¿Qué tal estás, Hamidullah? Pero ya veo que me traes malas noticias. ¿Qué le sucede a esa excelente persona?

—¿Por qué no contestas, Rafi? Tú eres la gran autoridad en este asunto —le dijo su tío.

—Sí, Rafi es nuestro gran hombre —dijo Hamidullah, restregando la herida—. Rafi es el Sherlock Holmes de Chandrapore. Habla, Rafi.

Sintiéndose tan insignificante como una mota de polvo, el estudiante murmuró la palabra «Diarrea» y nada más pronunciarla sintió renacer su confianza, porque con ella mejoraba su posición. Llamas de sospecha se alzaron de nuevo en el pecho de sus mayores, aunque en distinta dirección. ¿Cabía la posibilidad de que se diese el nombre de diarrea a un temprano caso de cólera?

—Sí eso es cierto, la situación es muy seria; apenas está terminando marzo. ¿Por qué no se me ha informado? —exclamó Aziz.

—El doctor Panna Lal le atiende —dijo Rafi.

—Sí, claro, hindúes los dos; ahí lo tenemos; se unen como moscas, manteniéndolo todo a oscuras. Rafi, ven aquí. Cuéntame todos los detalles. ¿Hay vómitos también?

—Sí, señor, efectivamente, y fuertes dolores.

—Entonces no hay más que hablar. Dentro de veinticuatro horas habrá muerto.

Todos se sintieron conmovidos y lo manifestaron, pero el atractivo del profesor Godbole había disminuido al sabérsele en manos de un correligionario. Les inspiraba menos simpatía que cuando lo consideraban aislado en su sufrimiento. No tardaron mucho en empezar a condenarlo como posible fuente de infección.

—Toda enfermedad procede de los hindúes —dijo Mr. Haq. Mr. Syed Mohammed había asistido a festivales religiosos, en Allahabad y en Ujjain

y los describió con amargo desprecio. En Allahabad había agua corriente que se llevaba las impurezas, pero en Ujjain habían cerrado el pequeño río Sipra y, al bañarse, miles de personas depositaban sus gérmenes en la rebalsa. Habló con repugnancia del mucho calor, del estiércol y de las caléndulas, así como del campamento de *saddhus*, algunos de los cuales paseaban completamente desnudos por las calles. Cuando le preguntaron el nombre del ídolo más importante de Ujjain, replicó que no lo sabía; que no se había molestado en averiguarlo porque no podía perder el tiempo en semejantes trivialidades. Su explosión de elocuencia se prolongó durante algún tiempo y con el acaloramiento terminó halando en panjabi (procedía de esa zona de la India) y se hizo ininteligible.

A Aziz le gustaba oír alabar su religión. La parte más superficial de su mente se calmaba con ello, permitiendo que por debajo se formaran bellas imágenes. Al terminar la ruidosa perorata del ingeniero, Aziz dijo: «Ese es exactamente mi punto de vista.» Extendió la mano con la palma hacia arriba y empezaron a brillarle los ojos y a llenársele de ternura el corazón. Apartando más la colcha, recitó un poema de Galib. No tenía conexión con lo sucedido anteriormente, pero le salió del corazón y conmovió a sus oyentes, que se sintieron dominados por su patetismo; lo patético —todos estaban de acuerdo— es la cualidad más elevada del arte; un poema ha de afectar a quien lo escucha haciéndole tomar conciencia de su debilidad, y debe al mismo tiempo formular alguna comparación entre la humanidad y las flores. En el sórdido dormitorio cesaron los ruidos; mientras palabras que todos aceptaban como inmortales llenaban el aire indiferente, quedaron en suspenso las estúpidas intrigas, las habladurías, los descontentos superficiales. Sintiéndola como verdad tranquilamente poseída y no como grito de batalla, les embargó la convicción de que la India era una; de que era musulmana; de que siempre lo había sido; y esa seguridad les duró hasta que volvieron de nuevo la vista hacia la calle. Fueran los que fuesen los sentimientos de Galib, también él había vivido en la India, unificándola de esa manera para ellos; Galib se había marchado con sus tulipanes y sus rosas, pero los tulipanes y las rosas permanecen. Y los reinos hermanos del Norte —Arabia, Persia, Ferganá, Turkestán— extendían sus manos

mientras Galib cantaba, tristemente, porque toda belleza es triste y saludaban a la ridícula Chandrapore, donde cada calle y cada casa estaba dividida contra sí misma, y le decían que era un continente y que estaba unida.

De los presentes, sólo Hamidullah era capaz de apreciar la poesía. Las mentes de los otros eran toscas y de inferior calidad. Sin embargo, escuchaban con agrado, porque entre ellos no había llegado a producirse el divorcio de literatura y civilización. El inspector de Policía, por ejemplo, no pensaba que Aziz hubiese hecho el ridículo recitando, ni había dejado escapar una de esas carcajadas joviales con que los ingleses evitan el contagio de la belleza. Se limitó a estar allí con la mente vacía, y cuando sus pensamientos, innobles en su mayor parte, volvieron a ocuparla, había en ellos una agradable frescura. El poema no había hecho «bien» a nadie, pero era una advertencia pasajera, un soplo de los divinos labios de la belleza, un ruiseñor entre dos mundos polvorientos. Menos explícito que invocar a Krishna, daba, sin embargo, expresión a nuestra soledad nuestro aislamiento, a la falta que nos hace el Amigo que nunca viene, pero al que nunca se renuncia enteramente. Terminado el poema, Aziz siguió pensando en mujeres, pero de manera distinta: menos definida, más intensa. Algunas veces la poesía tenía ese efecto en él; otras, sólo servía para dar mayor precisión a sus deseos y nunca sabía de antemano qué efecto se seguiría; Aziz no era capaz de descubrir reglas ni para éste ni para ningún otro de sus problemas cotidianos.

Hamidullah había pasado a visitarle de camino para un fastidioso Comité de Notables, de tendencia nacionalista, en el que hindúes, musulmanes, dos sikhs, dos parsis, un jainí y un cristiano nativo trataban de confraternizar más allá del impulso de sus tendencias naturales. Mientras alguien insultaba a los ingleses, todo iba bien, pero no se había conseguido nada constructivo, y si los ingleses llegaran a marcharse de la India también desaparecería el comité. A Hamidullah le alegraba que Aziz, a quien quería mucho y cuya familia estaba emparentada con la suya, no se interesara por la política, que arruina reputación y carrera, sin las cuales nada puede lograrse. Hamidullah pensó en Cambridge: con tristeza, como si se tratara

de otro poema que ya había terminado.;Qué feliz había sido allí, veinte años antes! En la rectoría de Mr. y de Mrs. Bannister la política carecía de importancia. Allí, juegos, trabajo y una agradable vida social se habían entretejido creando la impresión de configurar la adecuada subestructura para una vida nacional. Aquí todo eran maquinaciones y miedo. Ni siquiera podía fiarse de Syed Mohammed ni de Haq, aunque hubieran venido con él en su coche; ven cuanto al estudiante, era un escorpión. Inclinándose, Hamidullah dijo:

—Aziz, Aziz, mi querido amigo, tenemos que marcharnos, ya se nos ha hecho tarde. Ponte bien en seguida, porque no sé qué sería de nuestro pequeño círculo sin ti.

—No olvidaré esas afectuosas palabras —replicó Aziz.

—Considérelas también mías —dijo el ingeniero.

—Gracias, Mr. Syed Mohammed, así lo haré. «Y mías». «Acéptelas también como mías», exclamaron los otros, deseosos todos, dentro de sus posibilidades, de poner de manifiesto su buena voluntad. ¡Débiles llamitas, tan inextinguibles como poco eficaces! Los visitantes siguieron sentados en la cama, masticando la caña de azúcar que Hassan había ido corriendo a comprar al bazar, mientras Aziz bebía una taza de leche con especias. En seguida se oyó el ruido de otro vehículo. Había llegado el doctor Panna Lal acompañado del horrendo Mr. Ram Chand. El cuarto recobró al instante la atmósfera que se considera adecuada para una habitación de enfermo y Aziz se ocultó de nuevo bajo la colcha.

—Caballeros, excúsenme, he venido a preguntar por orden del Mayor Callendar —dijo el hindú, nervioso al verse en aquella guarida de fanáticos a donde su curiosidad le había llevado.

—Ahí lo tiene usted —dijo Hamidullah, señalando la forma yacente de su amigo.

—Doctor Aziz, doctor Aziz, he venido a interesarme por su salud.

Aziz alzó un rostro sin expresión al termómetro que se le ofrecía.

—La mano también, haga el favor. —Después de contemplar las moscas del techo mientras le tomaba el pulso, el doctor Lal anunció—: Tiene algo de fiebre.

—Creo que no mucha —dijo Ram Chand, deseoso de crear problemas.

—Tiene algo de fiebre; debe seguir en la cama —repitió el doctor Panna Lal, y acto seguido agitó el termómetro, con lo que la altura de la columna de mercurio quedó para siempre en el misterio. El doctor Lal odiaba a su joven colega desde el desastre con Dapple, y le hubiera gustado jugarle una mala pasada y contarle al Mayor Callendar que estaba fingiendo. Pero quizá también él necesitara muy pronto pasarse un día en la cama… y, además, aunque el Mayor Caendar siempre creía lo peor de los nativos, nunca se fiaba de ellos cuando iban unos con cuentos sobre otros. Una actitud de comprensión con el enfermo parecía lo más seguro—. ¿Qué tal el estómago? —preguntó—. ¿Qué tal la cabeza? —Y al ver la taza vacía recomendó una dieta de leche.

—Es un gran alivio para nosotros y una gran amabilidad por su parte hacer esta visita, doctor *sabib* —dijo Hamidullah, adulándole un poco.

—No hago más que cumplir con mi deber.

—Sabemos lo ocupado que está usted.

—Sí, eso es cierto.

—Y los muchos enfermos que hay en la ciudad.

El doctor Lal sospechó que se le tendía una trampa con aquella observación; tanto si admitía que había muchos enfermos como si decía que había pocos ambas afirmaciones podían usarse en contra suya.

—Siempre hay enfermos —replicó—, y yo estoy siempre ocupado; es algo que va ligado a la profesión médica.

—Anda escaso de tiempo, desde luego; ahora mismo tendría que estar ya en el Instituto —dijo Ram Cnand.

—¿Atiende usted quizás al profesor Godbole?

El doctor Lal adoptó un aire profesional y no dijo nada.

—Confiamos en que esté cesando la diarrea.

—Mejora su estado, pero no es diarrea lo que le aqueja.

—Estamos algo preocupados… El doctor Aziz y él son grandes amigos. Si quisiera usted decirnos qué dolencia padece le quedaríamos muy agradecidos.

Después de una pausa llena de cautela, el doctor Lal dijo: —Hemorroides.

—De manera que en eso se ha quedado tu cólera, mi querido Rafi —gritó Aziz, incapaz de contenerse.

—¡Cólera! ¿Qué será lo próximo que digan? ¿Qué no estarán diciendo ya? —exclamó el doctor, extraordinariamente agitado—. ¿Quién extiende tan falsas informaciones sobre mis pacientes? Hamidullah señaló al culpable.

—Oigo hablar de cólera, oigo hablar de peste bubónica, oigo toda clase de mentiras. ¿Dónde acabará?, me pregunto a veces. La ciudad está llena de noticias erróneas y quienes las extienden deberían ser descubiertos y castigados severamente.

—¿Has oído eso, Rafi? ¿Quieres explicarnos ahora por qué nos cuentas todas esas patrañas?

El estudiante murmuró que se lo había dicho otro chico, y también que la deficiente gramática inglesa que el Gobierno les obligaba a usar tergiversaba con frecuencia el significado de las palabras, confundiendo a los alumnos.

—Esa no es razón para acusar a un médico —dijo Ram Chand.

—Exactamente, exactamente —dijo Hamidullah, deseoso de evitar una escena desagradable. Las peleas se extienden muy de prisa y llegan muy lejos, y Syed Mohammed y Haq parecían enfadados y dispuestos a estallar —. Debes disculparte como es debido, Rafi; estoy seguro de que tu tío así lo desea —añadió—. Todavía no has dicho que lamentas las molestias que has causado a estos caballeros con tu imprudencia.

—No es más que un muchacho —dijo el doctor Panna Lal, aplacado.

—También los muchachos deben aprender —dijo Ram Chand.

—Creo que su hijo no ha logrado pasar el nivel más bajo —dijo Syed Mohammed súbitamente.

—¿De veras? Quizá sea así. No tiene la ventaja de contar con un familiar en la Imprenta de la Prosperidad.

—Ni usted la ventaja de seguir ocupándose de sus asuntos en los tribunales de justicia.

Las voces subieron de volumen. Mahometano e hindú siguieron haciendo oscuras alusiones, peleándose tontamente. Hamidullah y el doctor Lal trataron de que volviera a reinar la paz entre ellos. En medio del tumulto, una voz exclamó: —Lo que yo quiero saber es si está enfermo o no lo está.

Mr. Fíeldíng había entrado sin que nadie se diera cuenta. Se pusieron todos en píe y Hassan, en un gesto de deferencia hacia el inglés, golpeó con un trozo de caña de azúcar el cable cubierto de moscas.

—Siéntese —dijo Aziz fríamente.

¡Qué cuarto! ¡Qué reunión! ¡Mugre y palabras violentas, el suelo cubierto de trozos de caña y cáscaras de cacahuetes, manchas de tinta, cuadros torcidos sobre paredes sucias y ni un solo *punkabl* Aziz nunca había tenido intención de vivir de aquella manera ni entre personas de un poca categoría. Y en su turbación sólo pensó en el insignificante Rari de quien se había reído, permitiendo que los demás se burlaran de él. Tenía que conseguir que el chico se fuese contento o de lo contrario su hospitalidad habría fracasado en toda la línea.

—Es una gran bondad que Mr. Fielding se digne visitar a nuestro amigo —dijo el inspector de Policía—. Estamos muy conmovidos por su eran amabilidad.

—No le hable así, no le gusta, y tampoco necesita tres sillas; es sólo un inglés, no tres —estalló Aziz—. Rafi, ven aquí. Siéntate otra vez. Me alegro mucho de que hayas venido con Mr. Hamidullah; el haberte visto contribuirá a que me ponga bien en seguida.

—Perdone mis errores —dijo Rafi para afianzar su posición.

—Pero, vamos a ver, Aziz, ¿está usted enfermo o no lo está? —repitió Fielding.

—Sin duda el Mayor Callendar le ha dicho que estoy fingiendo.

—Bien, pero ¿es cierto?

Los presentes rieron complacidos, llenos de sentimientos amistosos. «He aquí un inglés con un humor inmejorable —pensaron—; nadie podría mostrarse más afable.» —Pregúntele al doctor Panna Lal.

—¿Está seguro de que mi visita no le resultará fatigosa?

—¡En absoluto! Hay ya seis personas en esta habitación tan pequeña. Por favor, sigan sentados, si nos disculpa usted la falta de protocolo, Mr. Fielding.

Aziz se volvió y siguió hablando con Rafi que, aterrado por la llegada de la persona a quien había tratado de calumniar, anhelaba marcharse cuanto antes.

—Está enfermo y no está enfermo —dijo Hamidullah, ofreciendo un cigarrillo al Director del Instituto—. Y supongo que la mayoría estamos en el mismo caso.

Fielding se mostró de acuerdo; él y aquel abogado tan afable y de gran sensibilidad se llevaban bien. Habían intimado bastante y empezaban a confiar el uno en el otro.

—El mundo entero parece estarse muriendo, pero no llega a hacerlo, de manera que debemos dar por sentada la existencia de una Providencia benevolente.

—¡Eso es verdad, nada más cierto! —dijo el policía, pensando que se ensalzaba la religión.

—¿También Mr. Fielding cree que sea eso verdad?

—¿Que sea verdad el qué? El mundo no se muere. ¡De eso estoy seguro!

—No, no…, de si existe la Providencia.

—Bueno, yo no creo en la Providencia.

—Pero entonces, ¿cómo puede usted creer en Dios? —preguntó Syed Mohammed.

—Yo no creo en Dios.

Un movimiento casi imperceptible, como de «¡ya se lo decía yo!» se fue transmitiendo entre los presentes y Aziz levantó la vista por un instante, escandalizado.

—¿Es cierto que ahora la mayoría de los ingleses son ateos? —preguntó Hamidullah.

—¿Las personas educadas que se preocupan de pensar? Yo diría que sí, aunque no creo que les guste esa palabra. La verdad es que en estos días el Occidente no se interesa demasiado ni por la fe ni por la incredulidad. Hace

cincuenta años, o cuando usted y yo éramos jóvenes, las cosas se veían de otra manera.

—¿Y no decae también la moralidad?

—Depende de lo que usted llame…, sí, sí, imagino que decae la moralidad.

—Disculpe la pregunta pero, si es ése el caso, ¿qué justificación tiene Inglaterra para seguir en la India?

¡Ya habían llegado una vez más! De nuevo la política.

—Es una pregunta a la que no estoy en condiciones de contestar —replicó Fielding—. Personalmente, yo estoy aquí porque necesitaba un empleo. No puedo decirle por qué Inglaterra está aquí ni si debe estar o no. Es un problema que me desborda.

—Indios con la adecuada formación también necesitan empleos en el campo de la enseñanza.

—Supongo que sí; yo llegué antes —dijo Fielding, sonriendo.

—Entonces, discúlpeme de nuevo… ¿es justo que un inglés ocupe uno de esos puestos cuando hay indios disponibles? Por favor, no interprete mis observaciones como una alusión personal. Estamos encantados de su presencia aquí, y esta conversación tan sincera nos beneficia extraordinariamente.

Sólo hay una respuesta a preguntas de este tipo: «Inglaterra sigue aquí por el bien de la India.» Pero Fielding no se sentía inclinado a darla. El celo por la integridad había hecho presa en él.

—Yo también estoy encantado de hallarme aquí —dijo—; ésa es mi respuesta y mi única excusa. No sé decirle si es justo o no. Puede que no fuera justo siquiera que yo naciera. Uso el aire de alguna otra persona cada vez que respiro, ¿no es cierto? De todas formas, me alegro de que haya sucedido, me alegro de estar aquí. Por muy malo que uno sea, si de ello se sigue su felicidad, queda justificado hasta cierto punto.

Los indios estaban desconcertados. Aquella manera de pensar no les era ajena, pero las palabras resultaban demasiado precisas y desoladoras. Si una frase no hacía de pasada unos cuantos elogios a la Justicia y a la Moral, su fría gramaticalidad hería los oídos y paralizaba las mentes. Lo que decían y

lo que sentían era (excepto si se trataba de afectos) muy pocas veces lo mismo. Sus cerebros funcionaban con numerosas reglas convencionales y si alguien las despreciaba les resultaba muy difícil seguir adelante. Hamiduilah fue quien menos se desconcertó.

—Y los ingleses que no están contentos de hallarse en la India, ¿tienen alguna excusa? —preguntó.

—Ninguna. Échenlos.

—Puede resultar difícil separarlos de los demás —rió Hamiduilah.

—Más que difícil, moralmente censurable —dijo Mr. Ram Chand—. Ningún caballero indio aprueba la expulsión como método adecuado. En eso nos distinguimos de otras naciones. Somos muy espirituales.

—¡Eso es muy cierto, absolutamente cierto! —dijo el inspector de Policía.

—¿Está usted seguro, Mr. Haq? Yo no considero que seamos espirituales. No sabemos coordinar; lo único que sucede es que no sabemos coordinar. No cumplimos nuestros compromisos y perdemos los trenes. ¿Consiste en algo más la supuesta espiritualidad de la India? Usted y yo deberíamos estar en el Comité de Notables, pero no es así; nuestro amigo el doctor Lal debería estar con sus pacientes, pero no se ha marchado. Así vamos y así seguiremos yendo, me parece, hasta el fin de los tiempos.

—Todavía no ha llegado el fin de los tiempos, no son más que las diez y media, ¡ja, ja! —exclamó el doctor Panna Lal, que había recuperado la confianza en sí mismo—. Caballeros, si se me permite, diré que ha sido una charla muy interesante; también deseo expresar mi reconocimiento y gratitud a Mr. Fielding: en primer lugar, enseña a nuestros hijos y proporciona a todos los grandes beneficios de su experiencia y buen juicio…

—¡Doctor Lal!

—¿Doctor Aziz?

—Está usted sentado en mi pierna.

—Le ruego me disculpe, pero alguien podría decir que su pierna da patadas.

—Vamos, en cualquier caso estamos cansando al enfermo —dijo Fielding, y todos abandonaron la habitación: cuatro mahometanos dos hindúes y el inglés. Se quedaron en el porche mientras acudían sus vehículos desde diferentes zonas de sombra.

—Aziz tiene una gran opinión de usted; si no ha hablado ha sido en razón de su enfermedad.

—Lo comprendo perfectamente —dijo Fielding, que estaba bastante desilusionado con su visita. El comentario del Club «rebajándose como de costumbre», le pasó por la mente. Ni siquiera lograba que le trajeran el caballo. Su primer encuentro con Aziz había sido tan positivo que Fielding confiaba en un inmediato afianzamiento de su amistad.

Capítulo décimo

Hacía mucho más calor que una hora antes, y la calle estaba tan vacía como si una catástrofe hubiera acabado con la humanidad durante aquella charla en la que no se había llegado a ninguna conclusión. Frente al bungalow de Aziz se alzaba una casa grande, aún sin terminar, que pertenecía a dos hermanos astrólogos; una ardilla colgaba en ella cabeza abajo, pegado el vientre al abrasador andamiaje y moviendo espasmódicamente una cola sarnosa. Parecía ser el único ocupante de la casa y sus chillidos estaban, sin duda, en armonía con el infinito, pero sólo resultaban atractivos para las demás ardillas. Otros ruidos procedían de un árbol polvoriento, donde pájaros pardos chirriaban y se movían torpemente buscando insectos; también un invisible pájaro calderero había iniciado su «ponk, ponk». A la mayoría de los seres vivos le preocupaba muy poco lo que la minoría que se llama a sí misma humana desea o decide. A la mayoría de los habitantes de la India no le preocupa cómo se gobierna la India. Tampoco los animales inferiores de Inglaterra se interesan por el país donde viven, pero en los trópicos la diferencia es más acusada, y el mundo incapaz de expresarse conceptualmente está más cerca y más dispuesto a recuperar el control tan pronto como los hombres se cansan. Cuando los siete caballeros que habían mantenido opiniones tan diversas dentro del bungalow salieron al exterior, tomaron conciencia de un peso común, de

una vaga amenaza a la que designaban como «la llegada del mal tiempo». Sintieron que no podrían hacer su trabajo, o que no les pagarían lo suficiente por hacerlo. El espacio entre ellos y sus vehículos, en lugar de estar vacío, parecía ocupado por una sustancia que se aplastaba contra su carne; los almohadones de los coches les abrasaban los pantalones; les escocían los ojos; cúpulas de agua caliente se acumulaban bajo sus cubrecabezas para escurrir después mejillas abajo. Luego de realizar un débil esfuerzo de despedida, se repartieron por el interior de otros bungalows para recobrar su dignidad y las cualidades que los diferenciaban entre sí.

En toda la ciudad y gran parte de la India se estaba iniciando, por parte de los demás seres humanos, la misma retirada hacia los sótanos, hacia lo alto de las colinas, hacia la sombra que proporcionaban los árboles. Abril, heraldo de horrores, estaba ya a la vuelta de la esquina. El sol regresaba a su reino con poder pero sin belleza: esa era su característica más siniestra. ¡Si hubiese existido belleza!

Su crueldad habría sido tolerable en ese caso. Por su mismo exceso de luz, también él fracasaba; bajo su marea blanco-amarillenta no sólo desaparecían las cosas materiales: también se ahogaba la misma luminosidad. El astro rey no era el Amigo inalcanzable —de los hombres o de los pájaros o de otros soles—, no era la eterna promesa, ni la sugerencia nunca desechada que obsesiona nuestra conciencia; era simplemente una criatura como las demás y, por tanto, desprovista de gloria.

Capítulo undécimo

Aunque los indios ya se habían marchado, y Fielding estaba viendo su caballo en un pequeño cobertizo en la esquina del patio, nadie se molestaba en traérselo. Iba ya a buscarlo él mismo cuando se detuvo al oír que le llamaban desde dentro de la casa. Aziz estaba sentado en la cama, con aspecto desaliñado y expresión triste.

—Aquí tiene usted su casa —dijo burlonamente—. La celebrada hospitalidad del Oriente. Contemple las moscas. Vea el *chunam* cayéndose de las paredes. ¿No es divertido? Supongo que ahora querrá marcharse, después de haber visto un interior oriental.

—En todo caso, usted necesita descansar.

—Tengo todo el día para descansar, gracias al respetable doctor Lal. Un espía del Mayor Callendar, como me imagino que ya sabe, pero esta vez no ha dado resultado. Me está permitido tener un poco de fiebre.

—Callendar no se fía de nadie, inglés o indio; es su forma de ser, y me gustaría que no tuviera usted que trabajar a sus órdenes; pero tiene que hacerlo y no hay más que decir.

—Antes de irse, porque evidentemente tiene usted mucha prisa, ¿quiere hacer el favor de abrir ese cajón? ¿Ve usted un pequeño envoltorio de papel marrón?

—Sí.

—Ábralo.

—¿Quién es?

—Era mi mujer. Usted es el primer inglés que la ve. Ahora guarde otra vez la fotografía.

Fielding sintió tanto asombro como un viajero que, de repente, ve flores entre las piedras del desierto. Las flores han estado allí todo el tiempo, pero él las ve de repente. Trató de examinar la fotografía, pero en sí misma no era más que una mujer con un *sari*, enfrentándose al mundo.

—A decir verdad, no sé por qué tiene usted esta consideración tan grande conmigo, Aziz —balbuceó—, pero la aprecio en todo lo que vale.

—No tiene importancia, no era una mujer muy educada, ni tampoco hermosa; puede guardarla ya. La hubiera usted visto si viviera, de manera que, ¿no es lógico que le enseñe su fotografía?

—¿Me hubiera usted permitido verla?

—¿Por qué no? Acepto el *purdah*, pero a ella le hubiese dicho que era usted mi hermano y se habrían conocido. Hamidullah la vio y algunos otros también.

—¿Creía ella que eran hermanos suyos?

—Claro que no, pero la palabra existe y es útil. Todos los hombres son mis hermanos y si se comportan como tales, pueden ver a mi esposa.

—¿Y cuando el mundo entero se comporte de esa manera, ya no habrá más *purdah?*

—Precisamente porque es usted capaz de hacer una observación como ésa, y de hacerla sinceramente, le he enseñado la fotografía —dijo Aziz con gran seriedad—. Es algo que está fuera del alcance de la mayoría de los hombres. Se la muestro porque usted se comporta bien cuando yo me comporto mal. No creía que fuese usted a volver ahora, cuando le he llamado. «Sin duda ha terminado conmigo; le he insultado», pensaba. Mr. Fielding, nadie se da cuenta del mucho afecto que los indios necesitamos, ni siquiera nosotros mismos nos damos cuenta. Pero lo apreciamos cuando se nos da. No olvidamos, aunque pueda parecer que lo hacemos. Afecto, más afecto, e incluso después de eso, más afecto todavía. Le aseguro que es la única esperanza. —Su voz parecía salir de un sueño. Modificándola, pero

todavía muy lejos por debajo de su tono normal, añadió—: Sólo podemos construir la India sobre lo que sentimos. ¿De qué sirven todas las reformas, los Comités de Conciliación para *muharram*, preguntarse si rebajaremos la *tazia* o la llevaremos por otro camino, las Asambleas de Notables y las fiestas oficiales donde los ingleses desprecian el color de nuestra piel?

—Es empezar la casa por el tejado, ¿no es cierto? Yo sí lo sé, pero las instituciones y el Gobierno no quieren enterarse.

Fielding contempló de nuevo la fotografía. Aquella mujer se enfrentaba con el mundo por deseo de su marido y también por decisión propia, pero ¡qué desconcertante lo encontraba, aquel mundo lleno de ecos contradictorios!

—Guárdela otra vez, no tiene importancia, ya ha muerto —dijo Aziz amablemente—. Se la he enseñado porque no tengo otra cosa que enseñar. Ahora puede usted recorrer todo el Sungalow y abrirlo todo. No tengo ningún otro secreto; mis tres hijos viven con su abuela lejos de aquí y eso es todo.

Fielding se sentó junto a la cama, halagado por la confianza puesta en él, pero más bien triste. Se sentía viejo. También le gustaría dejarse llevar por oleadas de emoción. La próxima vez que se vieran quizás Aziz se mostrase precavido y distante. Se daba cuenta de ello, y saber que se daba cuenta de ello le ponía triste. Afecto, afecto y más afecto…, sí, quizás eso sí pudiera darlo, pero ¿era de verdad todo lo que necesitaba aquella nación tan extraña? ¿No exigía también de cuando en cuando una especie de exaltación generalizada? ¿Qué había hecho él para merecer aquella explosión de confianza y que podía entregar a cambio? Fielding repasó su propia vida. ¡Qué pobre cosecha de secretos había producido! Existían cosas que no había mostrado a nadie, pero eran muy poco interesantes; no merecía la pena levantar un *purdah* para darlas a conocer. Fielding había estado enamorado y a punto de casarse, pero su novia rompió el compromiso, y los recuerdos le habían mantenido apartado de otras mujeres durante un tiempo; luego, algunas concesiones, seguidas de arrepentimiento y equilibrio. Muy poca cosa realmente, excepto el equilibrio, y Aziz no

quería que se le hiciera semejante confidencia: lo llamaría «todas las cosas fríamente ordenadas en estantes».

«Nunca intimaré con él de verdad —pensó Fielding; y luego—: Ni con él ni con nadie.» Tal era el corolario. Y tenía que confesar que no le importaba en el fondo; se contentaba con ayudar a la gente y encariñarse con ellos mientras no pusieran objeciones, y si lo hacían, seguir adelante sin perder la calma. La experiencia puede hacer mucho, y todo lo que había aprendido en Inglaterra y en Europa le servía de apoyo y le ayudaba a ver las cosas con más claridad, pero la claridad le impedía tener otras experiencias.

—¿Qué le parecieron las dos señoras con las que tomamos el té el jueves? —preguntó Fielding.

Aziz movió la cabeza con desagrado. La pregunta le recordaba su imprudente ofrecimiento sóbrelas Cuevas de Marabar.

—¿Qué le parecen las inglesas en general?

—A Hamidullah le gustaran en Inglaterra. Aquí nunca las miramos. No, no; somos muy cuidadosos. Hablemos de otra cosa.

—Hamidullah tiene razón: son mucho más agradables en Inglaterra. Aquí hay algo que no les sienta bien.

Después de otro silencio, Aziz dijo:

—¿Por qué no está usted casado? A Fielding le agradó que se lo preguntara.

—Porque más o menos he ido saliendo adelante sin hacerlo —replicó —. Estaba pensando en contarle algún día un poco sobre sí mismo si consigo hacerlo interesante. La mujer que me gustaba no quiso casarse conmigo…, eso es lo más importante, pero desde entonces han pasado quince años y ahora ya no significa nada.

—Pero no tiene usted hijos.

—No.

—Perdóneme que le haga esta pregunta: ¿tiene usted algún hijo ilegítimo?

—No. Se lo diría sin ningún reparo si los tuviera.

—Entonces, su nombre desaparecerá por completo.

—Sin duda.

—Esa indiferencia —dijo Aziz moviendo la cabeza— es algo que los orientales nunca entenderán.

—No me gustan los niños.

—No se trata de que a uno le gusten o no —dijo Aziz impacientándose.

—No los echo de menos; no los quiero llorando alrededor de mi lecho de muerte, ni hablando cortésmente de mí después, que es lo que, en términos generales, se espera que hagan. Me gustaría bastante más dejar una idea que un hijo. De los hijos se pueden ocupar otras personas. Yo no me siento obligado, con Inglaterra cada oía más atestada de gente y teniendo que venir a la India en busca de empleos.

—¿Por qué no se casa usted con Miss Quested?

—¡Cielo santo! Esa chica es una criatura imposible.

—¿Imposible? Haga el favor de explicarme lo que quiere decir.

—No la conozco lo suficiente, pero me parece uno de los productos más patéticos de la educación occidental. Me deprime extraordinariamente.

—Pero ¿por qué imposible, Mr. Fielding? ¿Qué quiere decir con eso?

—Siempre se comporta como si estuviera en una conferencia…, tratando con toda su alma de entender la India y la vida misma y tomando notas de cuando en cuando.

—A mí me pareció una persona muy simpática y sincera.

—Probablemente lo es —dijo Fielding, avergonzado por la dureza de sus palabras: sugerir a un soltero que debe casarse produce siempre por su parte afirmaciones exageradas y cierto revuelo mental—. Pero no podría casarme con ella aunque quisiera, porque acaba de prometerse con el Magistrado Municipal.

—¿Es eso cierto? ¡Cuánto me alegro! —exclamó Aziz muy aliviado, porque aquello le eximía de la expedición a las Cuevas de Marabar: difícilmente se le permitiría servir de anfitrión a personas ya definitivamente incorporadas a la comunidad anglo-india.

—Ha sido obra de la madre de Heaslop. Tenía miedo de que su querido muchacho escogiera por sí mismo, de manera que trajo a la chica con esa idea y los ha tenido juntos hasta que ha sucedido lo que ella quería.

—Mrs. Moore no me dijo que figurara ése entre sus planes.

—Puede que no me haya enterado bien… Siempre estoy al margen de lo que se cotillea en el Club. Pero, en cualquier caso, ya han anunciado su compromiso matrimonial.

—Sí; no hay duda de que ha quedado usted al margen, pobre amigo mío —sonrió Aziz—. No Miss Quested para Mr. Fielding. Por otra parte, no es una mujer hermosa. Prácticamente no tiene pechos, si se piensa en ello.

Fielding sonrió también, pero no le pareció de muy buen gusto hacer comentarios sobre los pechos de una dama.

—Quizás el Magistrado Municipal los considere adecuados, y ella a él. En cuanto a usted, ya le encontraré yo una mujer con pechos como mangos…

—No, no lo hará.

—No lo haré, desde luego, y además, por su posición en el Instituto resultaría un peligro para usted. —La mente de Aziz había pasado del matrimonio a Calcuta. Su expresión se hizo seria. Se imaginó las consecuencias, si hubiese convencido al Director del Instituto para que le acompañara allí y luego Fielding se hubiera encontrado en una situación difícil. Y repentinamente tomó una actitud distinta hacia su amigo, la actitud del protector que conoce los peligros de la India y está dispuesto a dar buenos consejos—. No puede usted pasarse de precavido, Mr. Fielding; piense que siempre habrá algún individuo envidioso que estará al acecho de todo lo que usted diga o haga en este maldito país. Quizá le sorprenda saber que había al menos tres espías en esta habitación cuando llegó usted a interesarse por mi salud. Me ha sorprendido mucho que hablara como lo hizo acerca de Dios. Sin duda alguna informarán de ello.

—¿A quién?

—De acuerdo, de acuerdo, pero también habló usted en contra de la moralidad y dijo que había venido a quitarle el empleo a otras personas. Se ha mostrado usted muy poco prudente. La India es un sitio terrible para los escándalos. Piense que incluso uno de sus propios alumnos estaba escuchando.

—Gracias por decírmelo; sí, tengo que procurar ser más cuidadoso. Cuando algo me interesa, tiendo a olvidarme de todo lo demás. En cualquier caso, el daño no es grave.

—Pero decir lo que uno piensa puede crear dificultades.

—Ya me ha sucedido otras muchas veces.

—¿Lo ve? ¿Qué le decía yo? El final de todo puede ser que pierda su empleo.

—Si lo pierdo, lo habré perdido. Sobreviviré. Siempre viajo ligero de equipaje.

—¡Viajar ligero de equipaje! Son ustedes una raza extraordinaria —dijo Aziz, dándole la espalda como para dormirse, y luego volviendo a la primera posición inmediatamente—. ¿Acaso lo da el clima?

—Hay muchos indios que viajan ligeros de equipaje: los *saddhus* y otros parecidos. Es una de las cosas que admiro de su país. Cualquier nombre puede trasladarse sin problemas mientras no tenga mujer o hijos. Ese es uno de mis argumentos contra el matrimonio. Soy como un santón pero sin la santidad. Pase esta información a sus tres espías y que les sirva de provecho.

Aziz estaba maravillado y lleno de interés, y empezó a dar vueltas en la cabeza a aquella nueva idea. ¡De manera que era ésa la razón de que Mr. Fielding y unos cuantos más fueran tan valientes! No tenían nada que perder. Él, en cambio, estaba firmemente enraizado en su sociedad y en el Islam. Pertenecía a una tradición que le ligaba, y había traído hijos al mundo, contribuyendo a la sociedad del futuro. Aunque viviese de manera tan incierta en aquel frágil bungalow, Aziz estaba situado, perfectamente situado.

—No me pueden echar de mi trabajo, porque mi trabajo es la educación. Creo en enseñar a la gente a ser individuos singulares y a entender a otras personas, también distintas. Es lo único en lo que creo. En el Instituto lo mezclo con trigonometría y todo lo demás. Cuando sea un *saddhu* lo mezclaré con otras cosas.

El inglés había terminado su exposición de principios y los dos guardaron silencio. Las moscas molestaban más que nunca, bailando muy

cerca de sus pupilas o introduciéndoseles en los oídos. Fielding empezó a manotear violentamente. El ejercicio le acaloró y se puso en pie para marcharse.

—Tendrá que decirle a su criado que me traiga el caballo. No parece apreciar mi urdu.

—Estoy al tanto de ello. Fui yo quien se lo dijo. Son ésos los trucos que empleamos contra los ingleses. ¡Pobre Mr. Fielding! Pero añora le dejaré que se vaya. Si se exceptúa a usted y a Hamidullah, no tengo a nadie con quien hablar en esta ciudad. Le cae bien Hamidullah, ¿no es cierto?

—Francamente bien.

—¿Me promete que acudirá a nosotros en cuanto tenga dificultades?

—Nunca puedo tener dificultades.

«Es un tipo bien curioso, confío en que no acabe mal», pensó Aziz al quedarse solo. El período de admiración incondicional hacia Fielaing había terminado ya y ahora Aziz tendía a adoptar una actitud protectora. Le era muy difícil seguir sintiendo un respeto reverente por alguien que ponía todas sus cartas boca arriba. Al tratarle más íntimamente, descubría que Fielding era una persona verdaderamente bondadosa y a quien nada importaban los formalismos, pero también falto de prudencia. Expresarse con tanta franqueza delante de Ram Chand, Rafi y los demás era peligroso y poco elegante. No servía para nada útil.

Pero Fielding y él eran amigos, hermanos. Eso ya estaba decidido; su pacto, sellado por la fotografía; confiaban el uno en el otro; por una vez el afecto había triunfado en cierta manera. Se quedó dormido entre agradables recuerdos de las dos últimas horas: poema de Galib, gracia femenina, el bueno de Hamidullah, Fielaing, su esposa, tan digna de reverencia, y sus queridos hijos.

Aziz se trasladó a una región donde las alegrías, en lugar de encontrar enemigos, florecían armoniosamente en un jardín eterno, o se deslizaban por canalillos de mármol, o se alzaban en cúpulas bajo las cuales estaban inscritos —negro sobre blanco— los noventa y nueve atributos de Dios.

SEGUNDA PARTE

CUEVAS

Capítulo duodécimo

El Ganges, aunque procede del pie de Vísnú y atraviesa la cabellera de Siva, no es un río muy antiguo. La geología, remontándose más allá de la religión, nos había de un tiempo en que no existían ni el río ni el Himalaya que lo alimenta, y en el que los lugares sagrados del Indostán se hallaban cubiertos por un océano. Al alzarse las montañas, los materiales sobrantes cegaron el mar. Luego los dioses ocuparon sus puestos e inventaron el río, creando esa India que llamamos inmemorial. Pero la India es realmente mucho más vieja. En los días del océano prehistórico, la parte sur de la península existía ya, y los lugares más altos de las zonas dravídicas han sido tierra firme desde que la tierra empezó a ser tierra, y han presenciado de un lado el hundimiento de un continente que las unía con África, y por el otro la aparición del Himalaya, surgido del mar. En el mundo no hay ninguna otra cosa tan antigua. El agua no ha cubierto nunca esas tierras y el sol que las contempla desde hace incontables eones quizá descubra aún en sus siluetas formas que eran suyas antes de que nuestro globo se desprendiera de su seno. Si carne de la carne del sol puede tocarse todavía en algún sitio, es aquí, en medio de la increíble antigüedad de estas colinas.

Sin embargo, también ellas sufren alteraciones. Mientras se alzaba la India del Himalaya, esta otra India, la primitiva, ha ido deprimiéndose, hasta entrar lentamente en la curva terráquea. Quizá dentro de muchos

eones también exista aquí un océano que cubra de cieno las rocas nacidas en el sol. Mientras tanto, la llanura del Ganges las invade de una manera que recuerda la acción del mar. Las zonas antiguas se están hundiendo bajo las tierras más recientes. Su masa principal sigue intacta, pero en el borde, sus puestos fronterizos han quedado aislados y se les ve hundidos hasta la rodilla, o hasta el cuello, en la tierra que avanza. Hay algo indescriptible en estos puestos fronterizos. No existe nada parecido en el mundo y una simple ojeada hace que el espectador contenga el aliento. Se alzan abrupta, desatinadamente, sin la proporción que mantienen en otros sitios hasta las colinas más bravías; no guardan relación con ninguna cosa vista o soñada. Llamarlos «sobrenaturales» hace pensar en fantasmas y esas formaciones son más viejas que cualquier espíritu. El hinduismo ha arañado y enyesado unas cuantas rocas, pero los santuarios tienen muy pocos visitantes, como si los peregrinos, que normalmente buscan lo extraordinario, lo encontraran allí en exceso. Un grupo de *saddhus* se instaló en cierta ocasión en una cueva, pero tuvieron que marcharse, e incluso Buda, que debió de haber pasado por allí de camino hacia el Árbol del Conocimiento Perfecto de Gaya, evitó un renunciamiento más completo que el suyo y no ha dejado ninguna leyenda de lucha o de victoria en las Colinas de Marabar.

Es muy sencillo describir las cuevas. Un túnel de ocho pies de largo, cinco de alto y tres de ancho conduce a una cámara circular de unos veinte pies de diámetro. Esta disposición se repite una y otra vez por todo el grupo de colinas, y eso es todo; eso es una cueva de Marabar. Después de haber visto una, o dos, o tres, o cuatro, o catorce o veinticuatro, el visitante regresa a Chandrapore sin saber si ha tenido una experiencia interesante o insulsa o si ha llegado siquiera a tener una experiencia. Le resulta difícil hablar de Tas cuevas, o distinguir unas de otras mentalmente, porque el esquema no se modifica nunca, y no hay nada que las diferencie entre sí: ni una escultura, ni siquiera un nido de abejas o un murciélago. No hay nada, absolutamente nada, vinculado a las cuevas, y su reputación —porque la tienen— no depende del lenguaje humano. Es como si la llanura que las rodea o los pájaros que pasan por allí hubiesen aceptado la obligación de

exclamar: «¡Extraordinario!», y esa palabra hubiera enraizado en el aire para ser inhalada por la humanidad.

Las cuevas son oscuras. Incluso en las que se abren hacia el mediodía es muy poca la luz que penetra hasta la cámara circular por el túnel de entrada. No hay mucho que ver, ni ojos para verlo, hasta que llega el visitante a consumir sus cinco minutos y enciende una cerilla. Inmediatamente surge otra llama en las profundidades de la roca y se pone en movimiento hacia la superficie como un espíritu encarcelado; las paredes de la cámara circular están maravillosamente bruñidas. La dos llamas se aproximan y hacen esfuerzos para unirse, pero no lo consiguen, porque una de ellas respira aire y la otra piedra. Un espejo con incrustaciones de bellísimos colores separa a los amantes, delicadas estrellas de color rosa y gris se interponen, exquisitas nebulosas, sombras más tenues que la cola de un cometa o la luna de mediodía, toda la evanescente vida del granito, que sólo allí se hace visible. Puños y dedos alzados sobre la tierra que avanza: allí, por fin, está tu piel, más delicada que cualquier recubrimiento adquirido por los animales, más lisa que la superficie del agua cuando no sopla el viento, más voluptuosa que el amor. El resplandor aumenta, las llamas se tocan, se besan y expiran. La cueva vuelve a ser oscura, como todas las cuevas.

Sólo las paredes de la cámara circular han sido bruñidas de esta manera. Los lados del túnel son rugosos y se contraponen a la perfección interior como una solución tardía. Puesto que era precisa una entrada, la humanidad la hizo. Pero en otros sitios, a mayor profundidad dentro del granito, ¿existen otras cámaras sin entrada? ¿Cámaras nunca abiertas desde la llegada de los dioses? Los rumores locales afirman que estas últimas exceden en número a las que se pueden visitar, como los muertos sobrepasan a los vivos: cuatrocientas, cuatro mil o un millón. Dentro de ellas no hay nada; quedaron selladas antes de que se crearan la peste y los tesoros; si la humanidad se sintiera curiosa y realizara excavaciones, no se añadiría nada, absolutamente nada, a la suma del bien y del mal. Se rumorea que una de ellas se encuentra dentro de la gran piedra que se balancea sobre la cumbre de la más alta de las colinas; una cueva en forma de burbuja que no tiene ni techo ni suelo y refleja hasta el infinito su propia

oscuridad en todas direcciones. Si la gran piedra cayera y se quebrase, también se quebraría la cueva, tan vacía como un huevo de pascua. La piedra se balancea con el viento porque está hueca, y llega incluso a moverse cuando un cuervo se posa en ella; de aquí su nombre y el de su magnífico pedestal: el Kawa Dol.

Capítulo decimotercero

Estas colinas parecen románticas con cierta luz y a la distancia adecuada, y, al ser contempladas una tarde desde la galería superior del Club, hicieron que Miss Quested —entre otros temas de conversación— le dijera a Miss Derek que le gustaría haberlas visitado; que el doctor Aziz había dicho en casa de Mr. Fielding que se ocuparía de la expedición, y que los indios parecían bastante olvidadizos. El criado que les estaba sirviendo el vermut oyó lo que decía. Este criado entendía inglés. No era exactamente un espía, pero mantenía aguzado el oído; tampoco puede decirse exactamente que Mahmoud Ali lo sobornara: tan sólo le animó a sentarse con sus propios criados, y dio la casualidad de que pasaba por allí cuando el criado del Club estaba de visita. A medida que la historia viajaba, iba creciendo de emoción, y Aziz se enteró con horror de que las señoras inglesas estaban terriblemente ofendidas, y habían esperado diariamente que les llegase su invitación. Aziz creía que un comentario tan superficial como el suyo habría sido completamente olvidado. Dotado de dos memorias, una temporal y otra permanente, había relegado hasta entonces las cuevas a la primera. Ahora hizo una transferencia definitiva y llevó el asunto a buen término. Las inglesas iban a disfrutar de una réplica maravillosa del té en casa de Fielding. Aziz empezó asegurándose de la asistencia del Director del Instituto y del viejo Godbole y luego encargó a

Fielding que invitara a Mrs. Moore y a Miss Quested cuando estuvieran solas: con esta estratagema se podía evitar a Ronny, su protector oficial. A Fielding no le hacía mucha gracia aquella comisión; estaba muy ocupado, las cuevas le aburrían, preveía fricciones y gastos, pero no odia decir que no al primer favor que su amigo le había pedido, e izo lo que se le indicaba. Las señoras aceptaron. La expedición presentaba algunos inconvenientes dada la multitud de sus compromisos, pero esperaban poder superarlos después de consultar a Mr. Heaslop. Ronny no hizo ninguna objeción, con tal de que Fielding aceptara plena responsabilidad en cuanto a la comodidad de las dos damas. Al Director del Instituto no le entusiasmaba la excursión, pero lo mismo les sucedía a las señoras; nadie estaba entusiasmado y, sin embargo, la excursión se llevó a cabo.

A Aziz, por su parte, le preocupaba mucho la organización. Se trataba de un viaje muy breve —un tren salía de Chandrapore justo antes de amanecer y regresarían en otro a tiempo para el *tiffin*—, pero él no era todavía más que un funcionario de poco importancia y temía cumplir su cometido deshonrosamente. Tuvo que pedirle medio día de permiso al Mayor Callendar, permiso que le fue denegado por haberse fingido enfermo poco antes; después de un ataque de desesperación, Aziz intentó una nueva aproximación al Cirujano-Jefe a través de Fielding, consiguiendo un enfurruñado y despreciativo permiso. Tuvo que pedirle prestados los cubiertos a Manmoud Ali sin invitarle. Después estaba el problema del alcohol: Mr. Fielding, y quizá las señoras, eran bebedores, de manera que ¿debía proporcionarles whisky con sifón u oporto? También estaba el problema del transporte desde la estación de Marabar hasta las cuevas, el del profesor Godbole y su comida, y el del profesor Godbole y la comida de los demás invitados; dos problemas, no uno solo. El profesor no era un hindú muy estricto: tomaría té, fruta, bebidas gaseosas y dulces cocinados por cualquiera y verduras y arroz si los preparaba un brahmán; pero carne, no, ni pasteles, por temor a que tuvieran huevo; y no permitiría que nadie comiera carne de vaca: un filete en el plato de otro, aunque estuviera lejos, le arruinaría la excursión. Los demás podían comer cordero y también jamón. Pero en este último caso la religión del mismo Aziz alzaba la voz:

no le apetecía ver a otras personas comiendo jamón. Una tras otra las dificultades le salían al encuentro, porque había desafiado al espíritu de la tierra india, que trata de mantener a los hombres en compartimientos estancos.

Finalmente llegó el día fijado.

Sus amigos consideraban muy imprudente que se relacionara con señoras inglesas y le insistieron en que tomara todas las precauciones posibles para no ser impuntual. En consecuencia, Aziz pasó la noche en la estación. Los criados estaban amontonados en el andén, ya que se les había ordenado que no se alejaran. Aziz mismo paseaba de arriba abajo con el anciano Mohammed Latif, que iba a actuar de mayordomo. El joven médico se sentía inseguro y como si formara parte de un sueño. Se oyó llegar un vehículo, y Aziz deseó que fuera Fielding quien se apeara, para prestarle a él solidez. Pero contenía a Mrs. Moore, a Miss Quested y a su criado de Goa. Aziz se apresuró a salirles al encuentro, repentinamente feliz.

—Han venido después de todo. ¡Cuánta amabilidad por su parte! —exclamó—. Éste es el momento más feliz de toda mi vida.

Las señoras se mostraron corteses. No era el momento más feliz de su vida, pero esperaban pasarlo bien tan pronto como superaran la molestia de salir a una hora tan intempestiva. No habían vuelto a ver a Aziz desde la tarde en casa de Fielding y le dieron las gracias adecuadamente.

—No necesitan billetes…, hagan el favor de decírselo a su criado. No hay billetes en el ramal de Marabar; ésa es su peculiaridad. Vengan al vagón y descansen hasta que Mr. Fielding se reúna con nosotros. ¿Sabían ustedes que iban a viajar con *purdah*? ¿Creen que les gustará?

Las señoras replicaron que estaban seguras de que sí. El tren había llegado y una multitud de sirvientes se lanzó a la conquista de los asientos como si fueran monos. Aziz había pedido criados a sus amigos, además de llevar los tres suyos, y el resultado eran peleas por motivos de preferencia. El criado de las señoras se mantenía aparte, con expresión despectiva. Mrs. Moore y Miss Quested le habían contratado en Bombay, cuando eran aún viajeras en constante movimiento. En un hotel o entre personas de buen tono era un criado excelente, pero tan pronto como se relacionaba con

alguien que él consideraba de inferior categoría las abandonaba a su desgracia.

La noche estaba todavía oscura, pero había adquirido esa tonalidad transitoria que indica la proximidad del alba. Desde el techo de una teja vana, las gallinas del jefe de estación empezaban a soñar con cometas en lugar de hacerlo con búhos. Se apagaron algunas luces para evitar la molestia de tener que apagarlas después; desde rincones en sombra llegaron el olor a tabaco y el ruido que hacían los pasajeros de tercera clase al escupir; había cabezas desenturbantadas y quien se limpiaba los dientes con ramitas de árbol. Tan convencido estaba un ferroviario subalterno de que el sol saldría de nuevo que tocó la campana con entusiasmo. Esto asustó a los criados. Gritaron que el tren iba a ponerse en marcha, y corrieron hacia los dos extremos para suplicar que no lo hiciera. Aún faltaban muchas cosas por meter en el vagón *purdah*: un cajón con refuerzos de latón, un melón con fez, guayabas envueltas en un trapo húmedo, una escalera de mano y una escopeta. Las invitadas desempeñaron perfectamente su papel. Carecían de conciencia de raza —Mrs, Moore era demasiado vieja, Miss Quested demasiado inexperta— y se comportaron con Aziz como lo hubieran hecho con cualquier otro joven que hubiera tenido con ellas las mismas deferencias. Esto hizo que su anfitrión se conmoviera profundamente. Había imaginado que llegarían con Mr. Fielding, pero en lugar de ello habían tenido la suficiente confianza para quedarse unos momentos a solas con él.

—Digan a su criado que vuelva a Chandrapore —sugirió Aziz—. No nos hace falta. Así seremos todos musulmanes.

—Y además es un criado horrible. Antony, puede usted irse; no le necesitamos —dijo la muchacha con tono impaciente.

—El señor me dijo que viniera.

—La señora le dice que se vaya.

—El señor dijo que estuviera cerca de las señoras toda la mañana.; —Bien las señoras no quieren estar con usted. —Miss Quested se volvió hacia el anfitrión—. ¡Haga que se vaya, doctor Aziz!

—¡Mohammed Latif! —exclamó el joven médico.

El pariente pobre intercambió su fez con el del melón y se asomó por la ventana del vagón cuya confusión se encargaba de supervisar.

—Éste es mi primo, Mr. Mohammed Latif. No, no le den la mano. Es un indio chapado a la antigua, prefiere hacer una inclinación de cabeza. Así, ya se lo había dicho. Mohammed Latif, ¡qué bien saludas! ¿Ven? No ha entendido; no sabe una palabra de inglés.

—Hablas una mentira —dijo el anciano amablemente.

—¡Hablo una mentira! Maravilloso. ¿No es un viejo divertido? Después tendremos ocasión de pasarlo muy bien con él. Hace las cosas más diversas. No es, ni muchísimo menos, tan estúpido como pudiera parecerles, pero sí tremendamente pobre. Es una suerte que nuestra familia sea tan numerosa. —Le pasó un brazo alrededor del mugriento cuello—. Pero entren, pónganse cómodas; sí, túmbense. —La celebrada confusión oriental parecía estar llegando a su fin—. Perdónenme, pero ahora debo recibir a los otros huéspedes.

Aziz se estaba volviendo a poner nervioso, porque sólo faltaban diez minutos para la hora de salida. Sin embargo, Fielding era un inglés y los ingleses nunca pierden trenes, y Godbole era hindú y no contaba; de manera que, tranquilizado por este razonamiento, su nerviosismo fue disminuyendo a medida que se acercaba el momento de partir. Mohammed Latif había sobornado a Antony para que no les acompañara. Los dos se pusieron a pasear de un extremo a otro del andén, hablando de cosas prácticas. Coincidieron en que habían traído demasiados criados, y tendrían que dejar a dos o tres en la estación de Marabar. Aziz explicó que quizá le gastara alguna broma en las cuevas; no con mala intención, únicamente para hacer reír a los invitados. El anciano asintió con suaves movimientos de cabeza; siempre estaba dispuesto a dejarse ridiculizar y pidió a Aziz que no se preocupara por él. Animado por su propia importancia se lanzó a contar una historieta indecente.

—Cuéntamela en otra ocasión, hermano, cuando esté menos atareado, porque ahora, como ya te he dicho, tenemos que agasajar a personas no-musulmanas. Tres europeos y un hindú que no debe ser olvidado. Hay que

tener todas las atenciones posibles con el profesor Godbole, no vaya a creer que le considero inferior a mis otros huéspedes.

—Hablaré con él de filosofía.

—Eso será muy amable por tu parte; pero los criados son aún más importantes. No tenemos que dar la impresión de estar desorganizados. Se puede conseguir y espero que lo hagas tú…

Del vagón *puntah* escapó un alarido. El tren se había puesto en marcha.

—¡Dios misericordioso! —exclamó Mohammed Latif, lanzándose hacia la vía y subiéndose de un salto al estribo de un vagón.

Aziz hizo lo mismo. No era una proeza muy difícil, porque los trenes de las líneas secundarias tardan en adquirir velocidad.

—Somos monos, no se preocupen —exclamó Aziz, agarrándose a una barra y riendo. Luego empezó a aullar—: ¡Mr. Fielding! ¡Mr. Fielding!

Allí estaban Fielding y el viejo Godbole, detenidos en el paso a nivel. ¡Terrible catástrofe! La barrera había descendido antes de lo habitual. Se apearon a toda prisa del *tonga*, gesticulando, pero ¿de qué servía? ¡Tan cerca y tan lejos al mismo tiempo! Mientras el tren pasaba por delante traqueteando, hubo tiempo de intercambiar algunas frases angustiadas.

—Mal, mal, me han destruido ustedes.

—La *pujab* de Godbole ha tenido la culpa —exclamó el inglés.

El brahmán bajó los ojos, avergonzado por causa de la religión. Era como Fielding decía: había calculado mal la longitud de una plegaria.

—Salte, le necesito —gritó Aziz, fuera de sí.

—De acuerdo, déme la mano.

—No debe hacerlo, se matará —protestó Mis. Moore.

Fielding saltó, falló, no logró coger la mano de su amigo y volvió caer junto a la vía. El tren siguió su ruidosa marcha. El Director del Instituto consiguió ponerse en pie y gritar a voz en cuello en dirección a los viajeros: «¡Estoy bien y ustedes también, no se preocupen!», antes de que la distancia y el ruido del tren lograran ahogar su voz.

—Mrs. Moore, Miss Quested, nuestra expedición se ha venido abajo.

Aziz se balanceaba sobre el estribo, llorando casi.

—Súbase al tren, súbase al tren; se matará usted igual que Mr. Fielding. No veo que se haya derrumbado nada.

—¿Cómo es posible? ¡Haga el favor de explicármelo! —dijo el otro lastimeramente, como un niño.

—Ahora seremos todos musulmanes, como usted nos ha prometido.

Su querida Mrs. Moore, tan perfecta como siempre. Todo el amor que había sentido por ella en la mezquita inundó de nuevo su pecho, y con mayor intensidad aún por haberlo olvidado completamente. No había nada que no estuviera dispuesto a hacer por ella. Moriría por hacerla feliz.

—Suba, doctor Aziz, nos da usted vértigo —exclamó la otra dama—. Si han cometido la imprudencia de perder el tren, son ellos quienes deben lamentarlo y no nosotros.

—Yo tengo la culpa. Soy el anfitrión.

—Qué disparate! Vuelva a su vagón. Vamos a pasarlo estupendamente sin los otros invitados.

No tan perfecta como Mrs. Moore, pero muy sincera y amable. Unas señoras maravillosas las dos y huéspedes suyas durante toda una mañana. Aziz se sintió importante y competente. Fielding suponía una gran pérdida personal, por tratarse de un amigo al que le unían lazos de afecto cada vez más íntimos, pero si Fielding hubiese venido, Aziz mismo habría tenido que funcionar con andadores. «A los indios no se les pueden confiar responsabilidades», decían los funcionarios británicos; y Hamidullah también lo decía a veces. Les demostraría a aquellos pesimistas que se equivocaban. Sonriendo satisfecho, lanzó una mirada al paisaje, todavía invisible excepto como oscuro movimiento dentro de la oscuridad; luego alzó la vista al cielo, donde las estrellas del Escorpión habían empezado a palidecer. Después se introdujo por una ventanilla de un vagón de segunda clase.

—Mohammed Latif, a propósito, ¿qué es lo que hay en esas cuevas, hermano? ¿Por qué vamos todos a verlas?

Semejante pregunta estaba más allá de las posibilidades del pariente pobre. Sólo fue capaz de responder que Dios y los habitantes de la zona lo sabían y que estos últimos harían gustosamente de guías.

Capítulo decimocuarto

La vida, en su mayor parte, es tan insípida que no hay nada que decir acerca de ella, y los libros y las conversaciones que quieran describirla como interesante se ven obligados a exagerar, con la esperanza de justificar su propia existencia. Dentro de su envoltura de trabajo u obligaciones sociales, el espíritu humano se dedica sobre todo a dormitar, advirtiendo la diferencia entre placer y dolor, pero mucho menos vigilante de lo que quisiéramos creer. Hasta en el día más emocionante hay períodos durante los que no sucede nada, y aunque seguimos exclamando «cómo me divierto» o «estoy horrorizado» no somos sinceros. «En la medida en que siento algo, eso que siento es placer, horror…» En realidad no se trata más que de eso, y un organismo perfectamente equilibrado guardaría silencio.

Sucedía que Mrs. Moore y Miss Quested no habían tenido sensaciones intensas por espacio de dos semanas. Desde que el profesor Godbole cantara su extraña cancioncilla, habían vivido más o menos como larvas dentro de sus capullos, y la diferencia entre las dos era que la señora de más edad aceptaba su apatía, mientras que la más joven lo llevaba mal. Adela estaba convencida de que el flujo total de los acontecimientos es importante e interesante, y si se aburría se culpaba a sí misma con gran energía y obligaba a sus labios a proferir frases de entusiasmo. Ésa era la única insinceridad de un carácter sincero en todo lo demás, resultado sin duda de

la protesta intelectual de su juventud, y ahora se sentía particularmente molesta porque se hallaba en la India y prometida en matrimonio al mismo tiempo, y este doble acontecimiento debería llenar de sublimidad cada instante de su existencia.

La India resultaba ciertamente mortecina aquella mañana, aunque estuvieran viéndola bajo los auspicios de los mismos indios. Su deseo se había visto realizado, pero demasiado tarde. No lograba entusiasmarse con Aziz y sus preparativos. No es que se sintiera en absoluto desgraciada o deprimida, y los diferentes y pintorescos objetos que la rodeaban —el cómico vagón*purdah*, los montones de alfombras y cojines, los melones que rodaban de un lado para otro, el aroma de los aceites comestibles, la escalera, el baúl con cantoneras de latón, la repentina irrupción del mayordomo de Mahmoud Ali, que salió del lavabo con té y huevos escalfados en una bandeja— eran todos nuevos y divertidos y provocaban en ella comentarios adecuados, pero no conseguían hacer mella en su mente. De manera que Adela trató de consolarse pensando que de ahora en adelante su principal interés sería Ronny.

—¡Qué criado tan simpático! ¡Qué alivio después de Antony!

—A mí más bien me sobresaltan. Extraño sitio para hacer el té —dijo Mrs. Moore, que tenía esperanzas de dar una cabezada.

—Quiero despedir a Antony. Su manera de comportarse en el andén ha sido la gota que colma el vaso.

Mrs. Moore creía que las mejores cualidades de Antony saldrían a relucir en Simia. Miss Quested iba a casarse en Simia; unos primos que tenían una casa con vistas al Himalaya la habían invitado.

—De todas formas, necesitamos un segundo criado, porque en Simia usted estará en el hotel y no creo que Baldeo, el criado de Ronny…

A Adela le encantaba hacer planes.

—Muy bien, consíguete otro criado y yo me quedaré con Antony. Estoy acostumbrada a su falta de entusiasmo. Me ayudaría a salir adelante en la estación cálida.

—No creo en la estación cálida. Las personas que siempre están hablando de ella, como el Mayor Callendar, lo hacen con la esperanza de

que nos sintamos inexpertas e insignificantes, igual que con su eterno «llevo veinte años en este país».

—Yo sí creo en la estación cálida, pero nunca supuse que me acorralaría como sin duda va a hacerlo.

—Porque debido al prudente compás de espera decidido por Ronny y Adela no se casarían hasta mayo, y, por tanto, Mrs. Moore no podría regresar a Inglaterra inmediatamente después de la boda, como había sido su intención. Para mayo se habría precipitado sobre la India y sobre el mar vecino una barrera de fuego, y Mrs. Moore tendría que quedarse encaramada en el Himalaya y esperar a que el mundo se enfriara un poco.

—No estoy dispuesta a dejarme acorralar —anunció Adela—. No comprendo a esas mujeres que dejan a sus maridos achicharrándose en el llano. Mrs. McBryde o se ha quedado ni una vez desde que se casaron; a su marido, que es una persona muy inteligente, lo deja solo durante medio año y luego se sorprende ele que falte comunicación entre ellos.

—No te olvides de que tienen hijos.

—Sí, eso es cierto —dijo Miss Quested, desconcertada.

—Los hijos son lo primero que hay que tener en cuenta. Hasta que crecen y se casan. Cuando eso sucede, una tiene derecho de nuevo a vivir para sí misma, en el llano o en la montaña, según le apetezca.

—Sí, claro, tiene usted toda la razón. No había pensado en ello.

—Si una no se ha vuelto demasiado vieja y estúpida.

Mrs. Moore le pasó al criado su taza vacía.

—Espero que mis primos me encuentren en Simia un criado que me dure por lo menos hasta después de la boda; luego Ronny tiene intención de reorganizar todo su personal. Ahora Te va muy bien tratándose de un soltero; pero cuando se haya casado habrá que hacer cambios…, sus antiguos criados no querrán que yo les dé órdenes y no se lo echo en cara.

Mrs. Moore levantó la persiana que cubría la ventanilla y miró hacia el exterior. La anciana señora había reunido a Ronny y Adela porque así lo deseaban ambos, pero no estaba en condiciones de darles consejos para el futuro. Sentía cada vez con más fuerza (¿visión o pesadilla?) que, si bien las personas son importantes, no sucede lo mismo con sus relaciones, y que, de

manera más concreta, se hacían demasiadas alharacas en relación con el matrimonio; a pesar de siglos de abrazos carnales, el hombre no estaba más cerca que antes de entender a sus semejantes. Y aquel día lo sentía con tanta fuerza que aquella idea parecía en sí misma una relación, una persona incluso, que trataba de cogerla de la mano.

—¿Se ve algo en las colinas?

—Sólo diferentes grados de oscuridad.

—No debemos de hallarnos muy lejos del sitio donde tropezamos con mi hiena. —Adela se esforzó por penetrar con la vista aquella penumbra intemporal. El tren cruzó un *nullah*. «Pomper, pomper, pomper» era el ruido que hacían las ruedas al pasar por el puente, moviéndose muy despacio. Cien yardas más allá apareció un segundo *nullah*, y luego un tercero, sugiriendo la proximidad de una zona más alta—. Quizá sea éste; en cualquier caso, la carretera corre paralela al ferrocarril.

El accidente era un recuerdo agradable; sentía, a su manera poco imaginativa y básicamente honesta, que había sido una buena sacudida para ella, enseñándole la verdadera valía de Ronny. Después volvió a pensar en sus planes, porque hacer planes era una pasión suya desde la adolescencia. De vez en cuando manifestaba interés por el presente, comentaba lo cariñoso e inteligente que era Aziz, comía una guayaba, renunciaba a una fruta de sartén, practicaba su urdu con el criado; pero sus pensamientos se escapaban siempre hacia el futuro controlable y la vida anglo-india en la que tendría que integrarse. Y mientras la valoraba, junto con el añadido de los Turton y de los Burton, el tren acompañaba sus frases con un «pomper, pomper», todo él medio dormido, sin ir a ningún sitio en particular y sin pasajeros de importancia en ninguno de sus vagones, circulando por su ramal secundario, perdido en un terraplén de poca altura entre campos monótonos. Su mensaje —porque lo tenía— quedaba fuera del alcance de la excelente capacidad mental de Miss Quested. Muy lejos, a su espalda, con un pitido que simbolizaba una actividad más seria, avanzando el tren correo, conectando ciudades importantes como Calcuta y Lahore, donde se producen acontecimientos interesantes y se desarrollan personalidades. Eso Adela lo entendía. Desgraciadamente, La India tiene pocas ciudades

importantes. La India es un conjunto de campos y más campos; colinas, jungla, colinas y otra vez más campos. El ramal secundario del ferrocarril llega a su término y por la carretera los coches sólo pueden pasar hasta cierto sitio; los carros de bueyes avanzan pesadamente por los caminos laterales, de los que se desgajan sendas que penetran por los cultivos y desaparecen cerca de una mancha de pintura roja. ¿Cómo es posible que la mente abarque un país de tales características? Generaciones de invasores lo han intentado, pero continúan en el exilio. Las ciudades importantes que construyen no son más que retiros; sus luchas encarnan la desazón de hombres que no encuentran el camino de casa. La India sabe cuál es su problema. Sabe cuál es el problema del mundo entero, en su realidad más profunda. La India dice «ven» a través de cien bocas, utilizando objetos ridículos y augustos. Pero ven ¿a qué? Nunca lo ha definido. La India no es una promesa, tan sólo una llamada.

—Iré a buscarla a usted a Simia cuando haya refrescado lo suficiente. La sacaré de su reclusión —continuó Adela, segura de sí misma—. Luego veremos algunas cosas de los mongoles, ¡sería terrible que se perdiera el Taj[2], e iré a despedirla a Bombay. Su última ojeada a este país resultará interesante. —Pero Mrs. Moore se había quedado dormida, agotada por aquella salida tan a deshora. No estaba demasiado bien de salud y tendría que haber renunciado a la expedición, pero había hecho un esfuerzo para no estropearles la diversión a los demás. Sus sueños seguían muy ligados a la realidad circundante, pero en ellos entraban también sus otros hijos, Stella y Ralph, que querían algo, y Mrs. Moore les explicaba que no podía estar en dos familias al mismo tiempo. Cuando se despertó, Adela había dejado de hacer planes y estaba asomada a una ventanilla diciendo—: Son realmente maravillosas.

Asombrosas incluso desde el altozano de la zona residencial inglesa, las Colinas de Marabar vistas desde el tren eran como dioses, a cuyo lado la tierra sólo tiene una realidad espectral. Kawa Dol era la más cercana. Estaba formada por un único bloque, en cuya cima se mantenía en equilibrio una roca (si es que a una masa de tan grandes dimensiones se le puede llamar roca). Detrás del Kawa Dol, recostadas, se hallaban las colinas

que contenían las otras cuevas, aisladas cada una de sus vecinas por anchos canales en la llanura. Todo el conjunto, diez colinas en total, se torció un poco al pasar lentamente el tren junto a ellas, como si observara su llegada.

—No me hubiese perdido esto por nada del mundo —dijo la muchacha, exagerando su entusiasmo—. Mire, está saliendo el sol…, esto va a ser magnífico…; venga de prisa…, mire. No me lo hubiera perdido por nada del mundo. No lo hubiéramos visto nunca de seguir pegadas a los Turton y a sus sempiternos elefantes.

Mientras hablaba, el cielo, hacia la izquierda, se volvió de un violento color naranja que fue extendiéndose, tembloroso, por detrás de unas siluetas de árboles, creciendo en intensidad, haciéndose más brillante, increíblemente más brillante, tensándose desde fuera contra el globo de la atmósfera. Las dos mujeres esperaron a que se produjera el milagro. Pero en el momento supremo, cuando tendría que haber muerto la noche y haber nacido el día, no sucedió nada. Fue como si hubiese faltado la energía en la fuente celestial. Los colores del Este se desintegraron, las colinas perdieron relieve, aunque, de hecho, quedaban mejor iluminadas, y la brisa matutina llegó acompañada de un profundo sentimiento de desilusión. ¿Por qué, cuando la cámara estaba dispuesta, no entró el novio con trompetas y chirimías, como espera la humanidad? El sol se alzó sin esplendor. En seguida se le vio arrastrarse amarillento detrás de los árboles o contra el insípido cielo y tocar el cuerpo de los campesinos que estaban ya trabajando sus tierras.

—Ah; eso debe de ser la falsa aurora…, ¿no se debe al polvo acumulado en las capas altas de la atmósfera que no llega a caer durante la noche? Creo que nos lo explicó Mr. McBryde. Bueno, tengo que admitir que Inglaterra se lleva la palma en lo que a amaneceres se refiere. ¿Se acuerda de Grasmere?

—¡Ah, maravilloso Grasmere!

Todos ellos estaban enamorados de sus lagos diminutos y de sus montañas. Romántica, pero mucho más dócil, aquella región pertenecía a un planeta más amable. Ahora, en cambio, se encontraban en una descuidada llanura que se extendía hasta las rodillas de Marabar.

—Buenos días, buenos días, pónganse los cascos —gritó Aziz desde la parte posterior del tren—. Pónganse los cascos inmediatamente, el sol de las primeras horas de la mañana es muy peligroso. Hablo en calidad de médico.

—Muy buenos días, póngaselo usted también.

—Tengo la cabeza demasiado dura —rió Aziz, golpeándosela y tirándose del pelo con las dos manos.

—Es una persona encantadora —murmuró Adela.

—Escuchen: Mohammed Latif les va a desear los buenos días a continuación.

Diferentes bromas incomprensibles.

—Doctor Aziz, ¿qué se ha hecho de sus colinas? El tren se ha olvidado de parar.

—Quizá sea un tren circular y vuelva a Chandrapore sin detenerse. ¡Quién sabe!

Después de internarse en la llanura por espacio de una milla, el tren disminuyó la marcha al acercarse a un elefante. Había también un andén, pero al lado del majestuoso animal resultaba insignificante. ¡Un elefante, balanceando su pintada frente en el aire matutino!

—¡Qué sorpresa! —exclamaron las señoras cortésmente, Aziz no dijo nada, pero estuvo a punto de estallar de orgullo y también por el alivio que sentía. La elefanta era el elemento más suntuoso de la excursión y sólo Dios sabía todo lo que había tenido que luchar para conseguirla. Era de propiedad semioficial y la mejor manera de llegar a ella era a través del Nabab Bahadur, a quien, a su vez, había que llegar a través de Nureddin, que tenía el inconveniente de no contestar nunca las cartas; pero su madre gozaba de gran influencia sobre él y era amiga de Hamidullah Begum, que se había mostrado extraordinariamente amable, prometiendo ir a visitarla si la persiana rota del coche *purdab* regresaba a tiempo de Calcuta. Que un elefante dependiera de una cadena de circunstancias, tan larga y tan frágil, llenaba a Aziz de satisfacción y le hacía reconocer —con una pizca de ironía— las virtudes del Oriente, donde los amigos de los amigos son un hecho, y donde tarde o temprano todo el mundo consigue su porción de felicidad. Y Mohammed Latif también estaba satisfecho, porque dos de los

huéspedes habían perdido el tren, y, por tanto, él podría ir en el palanquín en lugar de seguir al paquidermo en un carro; y los criados estaban contentos, porque un elefante aumentaba el sentimiento de su propia importancia, y procedieron a dejar caer el equipaje sobre el polvo, entre gritos y golpes, dándose órdenes unos a otros, estremecidos de buena voluntad.

—Necesitamos una hora para ir, otra para volver y dos para visitar las cuevas, aunque será mejor calcular tres —dijo Aziz, sonriendo de la manera más seductora. De repente había algo regio en su manera de comportarse—. El tren de vuelta sale a las once y media y estarán ustedes listas para el *tiffin* en Chandrapore con Mr. Heaslop exactamente a la hora habitual, es decir, a la una y quince. Estoy al tanto de todo lo que les concierne. Cuatro horas (una expedición muy breve) y una hora extra para esos posibles percances que se dan con cierta frecuencia entre mi pueblo. Mi idea es planearlo todo sin consultarlas; pero tanto usted, Mrs. Moore, como usted, Miss Quested, pueden hacer en cualquier momento los cambios que gusten, aunque ello signifique renunciar a las cuevas. ¿Están de acuerdo? En ese caso, súbanse a este salvaje animal.

La elefanta se había arrodillado, gris y solitaria, como otra colina más. Las señoras subieron por la escalera de mano, y Aziz a la manera *shikar*, pisando primero el borde del talón y luego la cola, doblada a manera de lazo. Cuando Mohammed Latif le siguió, el criado que sujetaba el final del rabo lo soltó de acuerdo con las instrucciones que había recibido previamente, de manera que el pariente pobre se escurrió y tuvo que agarrarse a la red que cubría la grupa de la elefanta. No era más que una pequeña payasada cortesana que sólo alarmó a las invitadas, para cuya diversión había sido organizada. A ninguna de las dos le gustaban las bromas pesadas. Luego el animal se alzó en dos movimientos semejantes a terremotos, situándolas a diez pies por encima de la llanura. Prácticamente debajo, estaba esa especie de escoria de vida que un elefante reúne siempre alrededor de sus patas: aldeanos y niños desnudos. Los criados arrojaron la vajilla en diferentes *tongas*. Hassan requisó el semental destinado a Aziz y desafió al sirviente de Mahmoud Ali una vez encaramado ya en la silla. El

brahmán contratado para preparar la comida del profesor Godbole fue abandonado debajo de una acacia para que les esperara allí hasta su regreso. El tren, también con la esperanza del regreso, se alejó bamboleándose entre los campos, volviendo la cabeza de derecha a izquierda como un ciempiés. Sólo se advertía otro movimiento más: uno como de antenas, originado en realidad por los contrapesos de los pozos que subían y bajaban sobre sus pivotes de barro por toda la llanura y suministraban un insignificante caudal de agua. La escena resultaba más bien agradable en el suave aire matutino, pero tenía muy poco color y ninguna vitalidad.

Mientras la elefanta se dirigía hacia las colinas (para entonces el descolorido del sol iluminaba ya su base y dibujaba sombras entre sus pliegues), hizo su aparición una nueva cualidad, una especie de silencio espiritual que afectaba a otros sentidos, además del oído. La vida seguía adelante como de costumbre, pero carecía de consecuencias, es decir, los sonidos no encontraban eco ni las ideas desarrollo. Todo parecía quedar cortado de raíz y, por consiguiente, contagiado de apariencias engañosas. Había, por ejemplo, algunos montículos junto al borde del camino, de poca altura, con estrías, y encalados en parte. ¿Qué eran aquellos montones? ¿Tumbas, pechos de la diosa Parvati? Los aldeanos que estaban abajo dieron las dos respuestas. También surgió la confusión —que nunca llegó a aclararse-con motivo de una serpiente. Miss Quested vio un objeto oscuro y delgado, alzado sobre sí mismo, en el lado más distante de una corriente de agua, y dijo:

—¡Una serpiente!

Los aldeanos se mostraron de acuerdo y Aziz explicó que, efectivamente, se trataba de una cobra negra, muy venenosa, que se había levantado para ver el paso de la elefanta. Pero cuando Adela miró con los prismáticos de Ronny descubrió que no había tal serpiente, sino tan sólo el reseco y arrugado tocón de una palmera. De manera que dijo:

—No es una serpiente.

Los aldeanos se negaron a admitirlo. Adela les había puesto la palabra en la mente y no estaban dispuestos a abandonarla. Aziz admitió que a través de los prismáticos parecía un árbol, pero insistió en que era realmente

una cobra negra, e improvisó unos cuantos disparates sobre camuflaje protector. Nada llegaba a explicarse y, sin embargo, nada resultaba románticamente atractivo. Cortinas de calor, despedidas por los precipicios del Kawa Dol, aumentaban la confusión. Llegaban a intervalos irregulares y se movían caprichosamente. Un pedazo de tierra saltaba como si lo estuvieran friendo y luego se quedaba quieto. La radiación desapareció antes de que alcanzaran la colina.

La elefanta se dirigió directamente al Kawa Dol como si fuera a llamar con la frente para que la dejaran entrar, pero luego desvió su marcha para seguir una senda alrededor de la base. Las rocas se hundían directamente en la tierra, como acantilados en el mar, y mientras Miss Quested lo comentaba y decía que era impresionante, la llanura desapareció calladamente, se esfumó, por así decirlo, y no se veía a ambos lados otra cosa que granito, completamente muerto e inmóvil. El cielo lo dominaba todo como de costumbre, pero además daba la impresión de haberse acercado peligrosamente, adhiriéndose como un techo a las cumbres de los precipicios. Era como si el contenido del corredor no hubiera cambiado nunca. Emborrachado con su propia esplendidez, Aziz no se daba cuenta de nada. Sus huéspedes sí advirtieron algo. No les pareció que se tratara de un lugar atractivo o que mereciera la pena visitar, y hubieran deseado convertirlo en un objeto islámico, una mezquita, por ejemplo, que su anfitrión pudiera haber apreciado y explicado. Su ignorancia se hizo patente en seguida, y esto era realmente un inconveniente. A pesar de sus palabras alegres y confiadas, Aziz no tenía la menor idea de cómo tratar aquel particular aspecto de la India; sin el profesor Godbole estaba allí tan perdido como las mismas inglesas.

El corredor se estrechó para ensancharse después, convertido en una especie de claro. Aquello, más o menos, era su objetivo. Un aljibe en ruinas contenía algo de agua que serviría para los animales, y cerca, por encima del barro, se abría un agujero negro: la primera de las cuevas. Tres colinas rodeaban el claro. Dos de ellas despedían calor con gran diligencia, pero la tercera quedaba a la sombra, y allí acamparon.

«Un lugar realmente horrible y sofocante», murmuró Mrs. Moore para sus adentros.

—¡Qué rápidos son sus criados! —exclamó Miss Quested.

Porque ya habían extendido un mantel, con un jarrón de flores artificiales en el centro, y el mayordomo de Mahmoud Ali les estaba ofreciendo té y huevos escalfados por segunda vez.

—He pensado que comiéramos algo antes de nuestras cuevas y que desayunásemos después.

—¿No es esto el desayuno?

—¿Esto el desayuno? ¿Creían ustedes que iba a obsequiarlas de una forma tan extraña?

Le habían advertido que los ingleses nunca cesan de comer y que tenía que darles algo cada dos horas hasta que estuviese lista una comida más sólida.

—¡Qué bien preparado está todo!

—Eso díganmelo cuando regresemos a Chandrapore. A pesar de los desastres que logre acumular sobre mi cabeza son ustedes mis huéspedes.

Ahora Aziz les hablaba con gran seriedad. Dependían de él por unas cuantas horas, y les estaba agradecido por haberse colocado en aquella situación. Todo marchaba bien hasta el momento: la elefanta se estaba llevando a la boca una rama recién cortada, las lanzas de los *tongas* apuntaban al cielo, el pinche pelaba patatas, Hassan gritaba y Mohammed Latif se mantenía en la postura adecuada, con una varita en la mano. La expedición era un éxito y era india; a un oscuro joven se le había permitido mostrarse cortés con visitantes de otro país, que es lo que todos los indios anhelan hacer —incluso los cínicos como Mahmoud Ali— sin que nunca se les presente la oportunidad. La hospitalidad se había conseguido, las damas inglesas eran «sus» huéspedes; en la tarea de hacerlas felices su honor estaba en juego, y cualquier molestia que sufrieran le desgarraría el alma.

Como la mayoría de los orientales, Aziz sobrevaloraba la hospitalidad, confundiéndola con la intimidad, sin advertir que resulta viciada por el sentimiento de posesión. Sólo cuando Mrs. Moore o Fielding estaban cerca de él, Aziz era capaz de ver más allá y de darse cuenta de que recibir es

mejor que dar. Los dos tenían sobre él un extraño y hermoso efecto: eran sus amigos, suyos para siempre y también Aziz de ellos para siempre; les quería tanto que dar y recibir se convertían en una sola cosa. Les quería incluso más que a los Hamidullah, porque había tenido que superar obstáculos para conocerlos, y esto sirve de estímulo a una mente generosa. Sus imágenes estaban ya grabadas en algún lugar de su alma hasta el día de la muerte, incorporadas a su ser de manera permanente. Aziz contempló a Mrs. Moore, sentada en una silla plegable, bebiendo el té que él le había ofrecido, y tuvo por un momento la alegría que encerraba en sí misma las semillas de su propia destrucción, porque le llevaría a pensar, «¿Qué más puedo hacer por ella?, con lo que volvía a empezar la monótona rutina de la hospitalidad. Sus ojos, de un negro intenso, se llenaron de una luz suave y muy significativa, y Aziz dijo:

—¿Se acuerda usted alguna vez de nuestra mezquita, Mrs. Moore?

—Claro que sí —dijo ella, repentinamente juvenil y llena de vitalidad. de lo brusco y descortés que fui yo y de lo amablemente que usted me trató?

—Y de lo felices que fuimos los dos.

—Creo que las amistades que empiezan así son las que más duran. ¡Podré agasajar alguna vez a sus otros hijos?

—¿Está usted enterado de que existen los otros? A mí nunca me habla de ellos —dijo Miss Quested, rompiendo sin querer el hechizo.

—Ralph y Stella, sí; lo sé todo acerca de ellos. Pero no debemos olvidarnos de visitar nuestras cuevas. Uno de los sueños de mi vida se ha cumplido teniéndolas aquí como huéspedes mías. No pueden imaginarse hasta qué punto me han hecho un honor. Me siento como si fuera el Emperador Babur.

—¿Por qué él precisamente? —preguntó Adela, levantándose.

—Porque mis antepasados vinieron con él desde Afganistán. Se unieron a él en Herat. En muchas ocasiones dispuso tan sólo de un elefante, y a veces de ninguno, pero no por ello se mostró menos hospitalario. Cuando luchaba o cazaba o huía, siempre se detenía algún tiempo entre colinas, igual que nosotros; nunca renunciaba ni a la hospitalidad ni al placer; si había poca comida insistía en que se sirviera de la manera más agradable, y

aunque sólo contara con un instrumento musical le hacía tocar una hermosa melodía. Le considero mi ideal. Es el caballero pobre, y llegó a ser un gran rey.

—Creía que su favorito era otro Emperador (no recuerdo el nombre) que mencionó usted en casa de Mr. Fielding; mi libro le llama Aurangzeb.

—¿Alamgir? Sí, claro, fue el más piadoso. Pero Babur nunca traicionó a un amigo en toda su vida, así que hoy sólo puedo pensar en él. ¿Y sabe usted cómo murió? Sacrificó su vida por su hijo. Una muerte mucho más difícil que perecer luchando. Les sorprendió el calor. Tenían que haber vuelto a Kabul para evitar el mal tiempo, pero no pudieron por razones de Estado y en Agrá Humayun su hijo se puso enfermo. Babur dio tres veces la vuelta alrededor del lecho, y dijo: «Me la he llevado», y así fue, efectivamente; la fiebre dejó a su hijo para apoderarse de él y Babur murió. Por eso prefiero Babur a Alamgir. No debiera hacerlo, pero es así. No quiero retrasarlas más, sin embargo. Veo que ya están listas para empezar.

—En absoluto —dijo Adela, sentándose otra vez junto a Mrs, Moore—. Nos gusta mucho este tipo de conversación.

Porque Aziz estaba hablando, finalmente, de lo que conocía y sentía, tal como lo había hecho en casa de Mr. Fielding; era de nuevo el guía oriental que tanto apreciaban.

—Siempre me gusta conversar acerca de los mongoles. No conozco otro placer mayor. Sucede que esos seis primeros emperadores eran toaos hombres maravillosos, y en cuanto se menciona a uno, no importa a cual, me olvido de todo lo demás, excepto de los otros cinco. Sería imposible encontrar otros seis reyes parecidos en todos los países de la tierra; quiero decir, uno detrás efe otro…,, padre, hijo.

—Cuéntenos algo sobre Akbar.

—Veo que han oído ustedes el nombre de Akbar. Bien. Hamidullah, a quien ya conocerán, les diría que Akbar es el más grande de todos. Y yo digo: «Sí, Akbar es maravilloso, pero hindú a medias; no era un verdadero musulmán», lo que hace exclamar a Hamidullah: «Tampoco lo era Babur, que bebía vino.» Pero Babur siempre se arrepentía después, y esa es la

diferencia fundamental, porque Akbar nunca se arrepintió de la nueva religión que inventó para sustituir al sagrado Corán.

—Pero ¿la nueva religión de Akbar no estaba muy bien? Quería abarcar a toda la India en su conjunto.

—Muy bien, pero muy insensata, Miss Quested. Usted conserva su religión, yo la mía. Eso es lo mejor. No hay nada que abarque toda la India, nada en absoluto, y ese fue el error de Akbar.

—¿Es así como piensa usted, doctor Aziz? —dijo Adela con aire pensativo—. Espero que no esté en lo cierto. Tiene que haber algo universal en este país…, no digo que sea la religión, porque yo no soy una persona religiosa, pero algo, porque si no, ¿cómo van a romperse las barreras?

Adela hablaba tan sólo de la hermandad universal con la que Aziz soñaba a veces, pero bastaba que se hablara de ella en prosa para que le resultara falsa.

—Considere mi propio caso —continuó Miss Quested; de hecho, ese era el motivo que le había impulsado a hablar—. No sé si lo habrá oído, pero me voy a casar con Mr. Heaslop.

—Por lo cual le ofrezco mi más cordial felicitación.

—Mrs. Moore, ¿puedo exponerle nuestra dificultad al doctor Aziz? Me refiero a la anglo-india.

—Es sólo tu dificultad, no la mía, querida.

—Eso es verdad. Bien, casándome con Mr. Heaslop me convertiré en eso que se conoce con el nombre de persona anglo-india. Aziz extendió las manos en un gesto de protesta.

—Imposible. Tiene usted que retirar esa horrible afirmación.

—Pero será así; es inevitable. No puedo librarme de la etiqueta. Lo que en cambio, sí espero evitar es la mentalidad. Mujeres como… —Adela se detuvo, poco deseosa de mencionar nombres; dos semanas antes hubiera dicho: «Mrs. Turton y Mrs. Callendar» sin reparo—. Algunas mujeres son muy…, bueno, muy poco generosas y muy *esnobs* en lo referente a los indios, y me moriría de vergüenza si me volviera como ellas, pero (y esa es mi dificultad) yo no tengo nada de particular, ninguna bondad o fortaleza especiales que puedan ayudarme a resistir el medio ambiente y me permitan

no ser como ellas. Tengo defectos terribles. Por eso quiero la «religión universal» de Akbar o algo equivalente para seguir siendo una persona honesta y razonable. ¿Comprende lo que quiero decir?

Las observaciones de la muchacha agradaron a Aziz, pero su mente se cerró por completo debido a la alusión a su matrimonio. No estaba dispuesto a inmiscuirse en aquel plano de cosas.

—Su felicidad está asegurada con cualquier familiar de Mrs. Moore —dijo él, con una ceremoniosa inclinación de cabeza.

—Pero mi felicidad es otro problema completamente distinto. Lo que yo quiero es su opinión sobre este problema anglo-indio. ¿No puede darme algún consejo?

—Es usted completamente distinta de las demás, se lo aseguro. No será nunca descortés con mi pueblo.

—Me han afirmado que lo seré al cabo de un año.

—En ese caso le han contado una mentira —dijo él precipitadamente, porque Miss Quested había dicho la verdad y le había herido en lo vivo; sus palabras eran en sí mismas un insulto en aquellas particulares circunstancias. Aziz se recobró inmediatamente y se echó a reír, pero el error de Adela quebró su conversación (casi había sido su civilización), qué se dispersó como los pétalos de una flor del desierto y les dejó abandonados en medio de las colinas—. Vengan —dijo, ofreciendo una mano a cada una.

Las señoras se levantaron un poco a regañadientes para ir a ver las célebres colinas.

La primera cueva quedaba relativamente a mano. Evitaron el charco y, con el sol cayéndoles a plomo sobre la espalda, treparon por unas piedras muy poco atractivas. Inclinando la cabeza, desaparecieron uno a uno en el interior de la roca. El pequeño agujero negro siguió boqueando allí donde las variadas formas y colores délos seres humanos habían funcionado momentáneamente pan ser luego absorbidos como el agua por un sumidero. Desnudas e imperturbables se alzaban las paredes de los precipicios; imperturbable y pegajoso el cielo que unía los precipicios; sólida y blanca, una cometa brahmánica se agitaba entre las rocas con una torpeza que parecía deliberada. Antes de que el hombre, con su preocupación por lo

adecuado, hubiese nacido, el planeta tierra debía de haber tenido aquel aspecto, La cometa se alejó aleteando.,, Antes que los pájaros, quizá… Y luego el agujero eructó, y la humanidad volvió al exterior.

Para Mrs. Moore aquella primera cueva de Marabar había sido una horrible experiencia, porque estuvo a punto de desmayarse, y le costó trabajo no decirlo tan pronto como se halló de nuevo al aire libre. Era bastante natural: Mrs. Moore siempre había tenido tendencia a desmayarse, y como todo el séquito entró con ellos, la cueva se llenó más de la cuenta. Abarrotada de aldeanos y sirvientes, la cámara circular empezó a oler mal. A causa de la oscuridad, Mrs. Moore perdió a Aziz y a Adela, no supo quién la tocaba, no podía respirar; una cosa repugnante, parecida a un trapo húmedo, le golpeó el rostro y le tapó la boca. Trató de alcanzar el túnel de entrada, pero un nuevo flujo de aldeanos la arrastró hacia el interior. Se dio un golpe en la cabeza y por un instante perdió la calma, manoteando y jadeando como una loca. No sólo le asustaban el mal olor y las apreturas, también había un eco aterrador.

El profesor Godbole no había mencionado un eco; quizá no le había llamado nunca la atención. En la India existen algunos ecos exquisitos, está el susurro alrededor de la cúpula de Bijapur[3], también las largas frases perfectamente articuladas que recorren el aire en Mandu y vuelven intactas a quien las ha creado. El eco de una cueva de Marabar no es como éstos, y no tiene ninguna característica que lo haga notable. Se diga lo que se diga, la respuesta es el mismo ruido monótono que vibra contra las paredes hasta ser absorbido por el techo. «Boum» es el sonido hasta donde el alfabeto humano es capaz de expresarlo; o «bou-oum», o «ou-boum»: algo totalmente insulso. La esperanza, la cortesía, el sonarse la nariz, el crujido de una bota producen un «boum». Incluso frotar una cerilla pone en marcha un gusanito que se enrosca, demasiado pequeño para completar el círculo, pero eternamente vigilante. Y si varias personas hablan al mismo tiempo se inicia un ruido como de aullidos superpuestos, los ecos generan otros ecos, y la cueva se llena de una serpiente compuesta de pequeñas culebras que se retuercen independientemente.

Detrás de Mrs. Moore —que dio la señal para el reflujo— salieron todos los demás. Aziz y Adela aparecieron sonriendo, y la anciana señora no quiso dar una impresión negativa, y también sonrió. A medida que surgían otras personas, Mrs. Moore intentaba descubrir entre ellas algún culpable, pero no existía ninguno, y en seguida se dio cuenta de que había estado rodeada de gente apacible, cerca de una hora en regresar. La anciana señora sacó el bloc para escribir cartas, y empezó; «Querida Stella, querido Ralph», luego se detuvo, contemplando el extraño valle y la insignificante invasión que habían protagonizado. Hasta la elefanta quedaba ya desprovista de relieve. Desde ella, Mrs. Moore alzó la vista hasta el túnel por donde se entraba en la cueva. No, no deseaba repetir aquella experiencia. Cuanto más pensaba en ella, más desagradable y aterradora le resultaba. Ahora le afectaba mucho más que en el momento de producirse. Podía olvidar las apreturas y los olores; pero, de alguna forma imposible de describir, el eco empezó a destruir insidiosamente sus energías vitales. Produciéndose en un momento en que se sentía muy fatigada, el eco había conseguido murmurarle al oído: «Patetismo, piedad, valor… existen, pero son idénticos, y lo mismo sucede con la inmundicia. Todo existe, nada tiene valor.» Si en aquel sitio se hubiesen dicho vilezas o recitado versos de gran aliento poético, el comentario siempre habría sido el mismo: «Ouboum.» Si se hubiese hablado con las lenguas de los ángeles1 e intercedido por toda la infelicidad y falta de comprensión del mundo, pasada, presente y futura, por todo el sufrimiento que los hombres tienen que soportar, sea cual fuere su opinión y posición, aunque se esfuercen por evitarlo o simulen que no les afecta, el resultado seguiría siendo el mismo: la serpiente descendería para regresar luego al techo. Los demonios vienen del Norte y se puede escribir poemas acerca de ellos, pero nadie es capaz de convertir en románticas las Colinas de Marabar, porque roban a la infinitud y a la eternidad su grandeza, la única cualidad que las reconcilia con el género humano.

Mrs. Moore trató de continuar la carta, recordándose a sí misma que no era más que una señora de avanzada edad que se había levantado demasiado pronto y había hecho un viaje demasiado largo; que la desesperación que empezaba a notar era solamente suya, producida por su debilidad personal,

y que incluso aunque sufriera una insolación y se volviera loca, el resto del mundo seguiría funcionando. Pero de repente, en un rincón de su mente, apareció la religión, el pobre cristianismo siempre tan hablador, y se dio cuenta de que todas sus frases divinas, desde «Hágase la luz» a «Todo está consumado», no pasaban a ser *buom*. Luego su terror se extendió a una zona más amplia que de costumbre; el universo, nunca comprensible para su entendimiento, tampoco ofrecía reposo para su alma; el estado de ánimo de los dos últimos meses adoptó por fin una forma definida, y Mrs. Moore advirtió que no quería escribirá sus hijos, que no deseaba comunicarse con nadie, ni siquiera con Dios. Se quedó inmóvil, llena de horror y, cuando el viejo Mohamed Latif se le acercó, pensó que notaría la diferencia. Durante algún tiempo se dijo a sí misma para consolarse: «Voy a ponerme enferma». pero terminó rindiéndose ante su visión. Perdió todo interés, incluso por Aziz, y las afectuosas y sinceras palabras que le había dirigido no le parecieron ya suyas, sino dichas por el aire indiferente que la rodeaba.

Capítulo decimoquinto

Miss Quested, Aziz y un guía continuaron aquella expedición que ya empezaba a resultar un tanto aburrida. No hablaban! mucho, porque el sol estaba cada vez más alto. El aire era como un baño tibio al que se añadiera sin cesar agua más caliente; la temperatura subía y subía; las grandes rocas decían: «Estoy viva», y las pequeñas contestaban: «Yo casi lo estoy también.» Entre las grietas se veían las cenizas de pequeñas plantas. Los excursionistas se proponían trepar hasta la roca en equilibrio que se hallaba en la cima del Kawa Dol, pero estaba demasiado lejos y se contentaron con el grupo más numeroso de cuevas. Ya de camino, encontraron algunas aisladas y el guía les convenció para que las visitaran, pero en realidad no había nada que ver; encendieron una cerilla, admiraron su reflejo en la pulida superficie, probaron el eco y salieron de nuevo. Aziz estaba «bastante seguro de que encontrarían en seguida alguna talla antigua de gran interés», pero sólo quería decir que le gustaría que así fuera. Lo que más le preocupaba era el desayuno. Estaban apareciendo síntomas de desorganización al abandonar ellos el campamento. Repasó el menú: desayuno inglés, *porridge* y chuletas de cordero, pero también algunos platos indios que sirvieran como tema de conversación, y después *pan*. Miss Quested nunca le había gustado tanto como Mrs. Moore y tenía muy poco

que decirle; y ahora que iba a casarse con un funcionario británico menos que nunca.

Tampoco Adela se sentía muy comunicativa. Si la mente de Aziz estaba ocupada por el desayuno, Miss Quested pensaba sobre todo en su matrimonio. Simia al cabo de una semana, librarse de Antony, la vista del Tíbet, el cansancio de la ceremonia nupcial, Agrá en octubre, despedir a Mrs. Moore desde Bombay asegurándose de su comodidad; la sucesión de acontecimientos pasó una vez más delante de ella, algo borrosa por el calor, y después Adela se consagró al asunto mucho más seno de su vida en Chandrapore. Era allí donde surgían las dificultades reales —las limitaciones de Ronny y las suyas—, pero a ella le gustaba enfrentarse con las dificultades, y decidió que si lograba no mostrarse demasiado quisquillosa (su punto débil de siempre), y no reñir con la India inglesa ni sucumbir ante ella, podrían disfrutar de una vida matrimonial feliz y provechosa mientras se afanaba subiendo por una roca que parecía un Platillo puesto del revés, pensó: «¿Y el amor?» La roca tenía dos hileras de muescas para apoyar los pies, y, de alguna manera, fueron ellas las que le sugirieron la pregunta. ¿Dónde había visto antes unas huellas parecidas? Ah, sí, tenían la misma disposición que las marcas de sus pies sobre el polvo junto a las ruedas del automóvil del Nabab Banadur. Ronny y ella…, no, no se querían.

—¿La estoy llevando demasiado de prisa? —preguntó Aziz, porque Adela Había hecho una pausa, con una expresión de duda en el rostro.

El descubrimiento se había producido tan de repente que Miss Quested se sintió como un montañero a quien se le rompe la cuerda. ¡No amar al hombre con el que se está a punto de casarse! ¡No haberse dado cuenta hasta aquel momento! Otra cosa más que quería reflexión. Molesta, más que consternada, Adela se quedó inmóvil, mirando la roca resplandeciente. Existía el aprecio mutuo y la respuesta animal ante el contacto, pero estaba ausente la emoción que une ambas cosas. ¿Debería romper su compromiso? Adela se inclinaba a pensar que no… causaría demasiados problemas a otros; además, no estaba convencida de que el amor fuera necesario para

que un matrimonio tuviera éxito. Si el amor lo fuera todo, pocas parejas seguirían unidas al terminar la luna de miel.

—No, no; estoy muy bien, gracias —dijo Miss Quested y, con sus emociones perfectamente controladas, continuó trepando, aunque se sentía un poco desconcertada.

Aziz la cogió de la mano, mientras el guía se adhería a la superficie como un lagarto y corría de un lado para otro como si disfrutara de un centro de gravedad completamente autónomo.

—¿Está usted casado, doctor Aziz? —preguntó Adela, deteniéndose de nuevo y arrugando el entrecejo.

—Sí, claro; tiene usted que venir y conocer a mi esposa.

Porque al joven médico le pareció más artístico devolver la vida a su mujer por unos momentos.

—Gracias —dijo ella con entonación ausente.

—Ahora mismo no se encuentra en Chandrapore.

—Y ¿tiene usted hijos?

—Sí, desde luego, tres —repitió Aziz con voz más segura.

—¿Disfruta usted mucho con ellos?

—Sí, naturalmente; los quiero muchísimo —rió el otro.

—Imagino que sí. —Aziz era un oriental muy bien parecido y, lógicamente, su mujer y sus hijos también serían hermosos, porque ordinariamente las personas consiguen lo que ya poseen. La admiración de Adela no quería decir que Aziz le atrajera personalmente! porque no existían tendencias caprichosas en su vida instintiva! pero se imaginó que resultaría atractivo para mujeres de su misma raza y situación social, y lamentó en su interior que Ronny y ella tuvieran tan poco encanto físico. Belleza, hermosos cabellos, una piel suave significan sin duda una gran diferencia en una relación. Probablemente, aquel hombre tenía varias esposas: los mahometanos! siempre insistían en las cuatro de rigor, según Mrs. Turton. Y como, sobre aquella roca inmutable, no tenía otra persona con quien hablar, Adela dio rienda suelta al tema del matrimonio y dijo con su habitual franqueza y espíritu inquisitivo—: ¿Tiene usted una o varias esposas?

La pregunta ofendió extraordinariamente a Aziz. Ponía en tela de juicio una nueva convicción de su comunidad, y las nuevas convicciones son más delicadas que las antiguas. Si Miss Quested hubiera dicho: «¿Adora usted a uno o a varios dioses?», no le habría parecido mal. Pero preguntar en la India a un musulmán educado cuántas esposas tiene…, ¡desconcertante, terrible! Le costó trabajo ocultar su confusión.

—Una; una en mi caso particular —balbució Aziz, soltando la mano de Adela.

Pocos pasos más allá había un buen número de cuevas, y pensando: «¡Malditos ingleses, hasta cuando tienen la mejor voluntad!», se introdujo por una de las aberturas para recobrar la calma. Miss Quested siguió adelante a la misma velocidad, sin la menor conciencia de haber cometido una equivocación; al no ver a Aziz entró también en una cueva, pensando con la mitad de la mente: «el turismo me aburre», y haciéndose preguntas sobre el matrimonio con la otra mitad.

Capitulo decimosexto

Aziz esperó un minuto dentro de su cueva, y encendió un cigarrillo, para poder decir: «Me metí ahí para resguardarme del viento», o algo por el estilo, al reunirse con ella. Cuando salió al exterior, se encontró al guía, solo, con la cabeza inclinada hacia un lado. Dijo que había oído un ruido, y también Aziz le oyó a continuación; era el motor de un automóvil. Se hallaban ahora en el saliente exterior del Kawa Dol, y gateando unas veinte yardas lograron echar una ojeada a la llanura. Por la carretera de Chandrapore venía un automóvil en dirección a las colinas. Pero no pudieron verlo bien, porque el escarpado baluarte se curvaba en la parte más alta, de manera que no era fácil ver la base, y el coche desapareció al aproximarse. Sin duda se detendría casi exactamente debajo de ellos, en el sitio donde la carretera degeneraba en senda, y donde la elefanta había girado para meterse entre las colinas.

Aziz volvió corriendo, para contarle la extraña noticia a su invitada.

El guía le explicó que había entrado en una cueva.

—¿Cuál?

El guía indicó todo el grupo de manera imprecisa.

—Tu obligación era no perderla de vista —dijo Aziz, con tono severo —. Aquí hay doce cuevas por lo menos. ¿Cómo voy a saber en cuál de ellas se encuentra mi invitada? ¿En qué cueva estaba yo?

El mismo gesto impreciso. Y Aziz, mirando de nuevo, no tuvo siquiera la seguridad de haber vuelto al mismo grupo. Había cuevas en todas direcciones —daba la impresión de ser el sitio donde habían empezado a reproducirse— y todos los orificios de entrada eran idénticos. «Cielo misericordioso, Miss Quested se ha perdido», pensó Aziz, pero luego hizo un esfuerzo para serenarse y se puso a buscarla con más calma.

—¡Grita! —le ordenó al guía.

Después de haber estado haciendo esto durante un rato, el guía explicó que gritar era inútil, porque las cuevas de Marabar no oyen otro ruido que el suyo propio. Aziz se secó el rostro y el sudor empezó a correrle a raudales por dentro de la ropa. Aquel lugar resultaba terriblemente confuso, en parte liso y en parte lleno de zigzags, con multitud de hendiduras que llevaban en una dirección y en otra, semejantes a rastros de serpientes. Se propuso entrar en todas, pero nunca lograba saber dónde había empezado. Nuevas cuevas aparecían detrás de las anteriores o se reunían en parejas, y algunas se hallaban a la entrada de un barranco.

—¡Ven aquí! —llamó Aziz con suavidad, y cuando el guía se puso al su alcance le dio una bofetada como castigo.

El hombre salió huyendo y él se quedó solo. «Esto es el fin de mil carrera, mi huésped se ha perdido», pensó. Pero en seguida encontró una explicación válida y muy sencilla del misterio.

Miss Quested no se había perdido, sino que estaba con las personas del coche: amigos suyos, quizá Mr. Heaslop. De repente pudo ver a Miss Quested durante un momento, barranco abajo; sólo la vio un momento, pero allí estaba sin duda alguna, enmarcada entre rocas, y hablando con otra señora. Se sintió tan aliviado que no le pareció extraño su comportamiento. Acostumbrado a repentinos cambios de planes, Aziz supuso que Miss Quested había bajado el Kawa Dol a toda prisa, siguiendo un impulso, con la esperanza de dar un paseo en coche. Nada más iniciar la vuelta al campamento vio algo que poco antes le hubiera preocupado mucho: los prismáticos de Miss Quested. Estaban en el suelo, hacia la mitad del túnel de entrada a una de las cuevas. Trató de colgárselos del hombro, pero la correa de cuero se había roto, de manera que se los metió en el bolsillo.

Después de avanzar unos cuantos pasos se le ocurrió que quizá Miss Quested hubiese dejado caer algo más y volvió atrás para comprobarlo. Pero se tropezó de nuevo con la misma dificultad: era incapaz de identificar la cueva. Abajo, en la llanura, oyó arrancar el coche, pero esta segunda vez no consiguió verlo. Después fue descendiendo por el lado de la colina que daba al valle, en dirección a Mrs. Moore, y en esta tarea sus esfuerzos tuvieron más éxito: pronto apareció el color y la confusión de su pequeño campamento, y en el centro de él divisó el casco de un inglés, y debajo —¡qué alegría!— reconoció la sonrisa de Fielding en lugar de a Mr. Heaslop.

—¡Fielding! ¡cuánto he deseado tenerle conmigo! —exclamó, prescindiendo del «Mr.» por primera vez.

Su amigo corrió a su encuentro con la mayor naturalidad y alegría, sin preocuparse de mantener un aire respetable, dando explicaciones y pidiendo disculpas a voz en grito por haber perdido el tren. Fielding había venido en el automóvil que acababa de llegar —el coche de Miss Derek—, y la otra señora era Miss Derek. Charlaron por los codos mientras todos los criados se olvidaban de cocinar para escucharlos. ¡Excelente persona, Miss Derek! Se había encontrado con Fielding por casualidad en correos. «¿Por qué no ha ido usted a Marabar?», le preguntó. Al enterarse de cómo Fielding había perdido el tren, se ofreció a llevarle sin pensarlo dos veces.

Otra inglesa simpática. ¿Dónde estaba? Se había quedado en el coche con el chófer mientras Fielding encontraba el campamento. El automóvil no podía llegar hasta allí —no, claro que no—, cientos de personas tenían que bajar para escoltar a Miss Derek y mostrarle el camino. La misma elefanta…

—Aziz, ¿podría tomarme una copa?

—Naturalmente que no —dijo Aziz, corriendo a buscársela.

—¡Mr. Fielding! —llamó Mrs. Moore desde su trozo de sombra; no se habían saludado aún, porque la llegada del Director del Instituto había coincidido con la reaparición de Aziz.

—¡Buenos días de nuevo! —exclamó Fielding, aliviado al encontrarse todo en orden.

—Mr. Fielding, ¿ha visto usted a Miss Quested?

—Acabo de llegar. ¿Dónde está?

—No lo sé.

—¡Aziz! ¿Qué ha hecho con Miss Quested?

Aziz, que volvía con una copa en la mano, tuvo que detenerse a pensar un momento. Su corazón rebosaba de felicidad. La excursión, después de un susto o dos, se había convertido en algo que superaba todas sus esperanzas, porque Fielding, además de venir, había traído otra invitada.

—Está perfectamente —dijo—; ha bajado a ver a Miss Derek. Bien, ¡por nuestra felicidad! ¡Chin-chin!

—Por nuestra felicidad, de acuerdo; pero me niego a decir chin-chin —rió Fielding, que detestaba aquella expresión—. ¡Por la India!

—¡Por nuestra felicidad y por Inglaterra!

El chófer de Miss Derek detuvo el cortejo que se disponía a acompañar a su señora en la ascensión, informándoles de que había vuelto a Chandrapore con la otra joven inglesa; le había enviado a él para decirlo. Miss Derek en persona conducía el automóvil.

—Claro; es una cosa muy normal —dijo Aziz—. Ya me imaginaba yo que se habían ido a dar un paseo.

—¿Chandrapore? Ese hombre debe de estar equivocado —exclamó Fielding.

—No, ¿por qué?

Aziz se sentía desilusionado, pero trató de quitarle importancia; era evidente que las dos jóvenes eran grandes amigas. Prefería dar de desayunar a los cuatro; pero los invitados deben poder hacer lo que les apetezca, porque de lo contrario se convierten en prisioneros. Aziz se alejó para inspeccionar el *porridge* y el hielo, animado por la mejor buena voluntad.

—¿Qué ha sucedido? —preguntó Fielding, advirtiendo en seguida que había pasado algo extraño.

Mientras venían en el coche, Miss Derek no había dejado de hablar de la excursión, calificándola de placer inesperado, afirmando que prefería a los indios que no la invitaban a sus fiestas:! Mrs. Moore seguía sentada moviendo un pie y parecía malhumorada e indiferente a todo lo que la rodeaba.

—Miss Derek es una mujer muy inquieta y difícil de contentar! —dijo —; siempre con prisa, siempre deseosa de algo nuevo; dispuesta a hacer cualquier cosa menos volver con la señora india que le está pagando un sueldo.

—No tenía ninguna prisa cuando la dejé —replicó Fielding, que no sentía animosidad contra Miss Derek—. Tampoco mencionó la posibilidad de regresar a Chandrapore. Me inclino más bien a pensar que fuera Miss Quested quien tuviese prisa.

—¿Adela? No ha tenido nunca prisa en toda su vida —dijo la anciana con tono cortante.

—Ya verá como ha sido idea de Miss Quested; estoy completamente seguro —insistió el Director del Instituto. Estaba molesto; sobre todo consigo mismo. Había empezado por perder el tren (un pecado que nunca cometía), y ahora que llegaba por fin, echaba a perder los planes de Aziz por segunda vez. Quería que alguien compartiera sus culpas, y miró ceñudamente a Mrs. Moore con aire bastante autoritario—. Aziz es una persona encantadora —anunció.

—Lo sé —contestó ella con un bostezo.

—Se ha tomado infinitas molestias para que nuestra excursión fuera un éxito.

Mr. Fielding y Mrs, Moore se conocían muy poco, y les producía cierto embarazo tener que tratarse por intermedio de un indio. El problema racial puede adoptar formas muy sutiles. En su caso había producido algo muy parecido a los celos, una mutua actitud de desconfianza. El Director del Instituto trató de estimular el entusiasmo de la anciana; ella no dijo apenas nada. Aziz vino a buscarles para ir a desayunar.

—Lo que ha sucedido con Miss Quested es perfectamente natural —explicó el anfitrión, que había estado pensando un poco en el incidente para conseguir quitarle las aristas—. Manteníamos una interesante conversación con el guía cuando apareció el coche, de manera que Miss Quested decidió bajar a saludar a su amiga—. Incurablemente inexacto, Aziz se había persuadido ya de que era eso lo sucedido. Pero en este caso la inexactitud nacía de su misma delicadeza. No quería recordar la observación de Miss

Quested sobre la poligamia por considerarla impropia de una invitada, de manera que la expulsó de su mente, y con ella el recuerdo de que él se había introducido en una cueva para alejarse de Adela. Aziz era inexacto porque quería honrar a su huésped y, como la realidad no casaba con sus deseos, tenía que arreglarla alrededor de Miss Quested como uno nivela la tierra después de arrancar una mala hierba. Antes de que terminara el desayuno Aziz había contado un buen número de mentiras—. Miss Quested corrió a recibir a su amiga, y yo al mío —continuó, sonriendo—. Y ahora yo estoy con mis amigos, y mis amigos están conmigo y también unidos entre sí: eso es la felicidad.

Al amarlos a los dos, Aziz también esperaba que se amaran entre sí, Pero ellos no querían. «Ya sabía yo que estas mujeres iban a causar problemas», pensó Fielding lleno de hostilidad. «Este hombre, después de perder el tren, quiere echarnos la culpa a nosotras», pensó Mrs. Moore; pero sus pensamientos carecían de fuerza; desde el momento de debilidad en la cueva se había hundido en la apatía y en el cinismo. La India maravillosa de las primeras semanas, con sus noches de suaves brisas refrescantes y sus sugerentes indicios de una realidad infinita, se habían desvanecido para siempre.

Fielding subió a ver una cueva. No le causó gran impresión. Luego se montaron en la elefanta, hicieron a la inversa el recorrido entre las masas de piedra y escaparon de las colinas en dirección al ferrocarril, perseguidos por ráfagas de aire caliente. Llegaron al sitio donde Fielding se había apeado del automóvil. Se le ocurrió entonces una idea muy desagradable y preguntó:

—Aziz, ¿dónde y cómo exactamente se separó usted de Miss Quested?

—Allí arriba —dijo, señalando alegremente el Kawa Dol.

—Pero cómo…

—Una quebrada, o más bien un pliegue, era visible entre las rocas en aquel punto, y todo él salpicado de cactos,

—Supongo que el guía la ayudó a bajar.

—Sí, claro; se mostró muy servicial.

—¿Hay una senda para bajar desde la cima?

—Millones de sendas, mi querido amigo. Fielding divisaba tan sólo la plegadura entre las rocas. Por todas partes, el granito cegador se hundía verticalmente en la tierra.

—Pero ¿usted les vio llegar abajo sanos y salvos?

—Sí, sí; Miss Quested y Miss Derek, y se fueron juntas en el coche.

—¿El guía volvió luego a reunirse con usted?

—Exactamente. ¿Tiene un cigarrillo?

—Confío en que no estuviera enferma —continuó el inglés.

La plegadura entre las rocas se continuaba en un *nullah* a través de la llanura, recogiendo el agua de aquella vertiente para llevarla hacia el Ganges.

—De estar enferma me hubiese buscado a mí para que la atendiera.

—Sí, eso parece razonable.

—Veo que está usted preocupado; vamos a hablar de otras cosas —dijo Aziz amablemente—. Miss Quested podía hacer en cualquier momento lo que le apeteciera; eso era lo que habíamos acordado.

Veo que se preocupa usted por causa mía, pero no me importa nada, de verdad, nunca me fijo en menudencias.

—Sí que me preocupo por usted. ¡Creo que han sido muy descorteses! —dijo Fielding, tajando la voz—. Miss Quested no tenía derecho a marcharse así y Miss Derek no debiera haberla ayudado.

Aunque Aziz era muy susceptible de ordinario, en aquella ocasión se mostró irreductible. Las alas que le mantenían en alto no vacilaron, porque era un Emperador mongol que había cumplido con su deber. Subido en su elefanta, vio alejarse las Colinas de Marabar, y contempló de nuevo, como provincias de su reino, la descuidada y tétrica llanura, el frenético e ineficaz movimiento de los pozales, los blancos santuarios, las tumbas casi a ras de tierra, la agradable tonalidad del cielo, la serpiente que parecía un árbol. Había procurado que sus huéspedes lo pasaran lo mejor posible, y si llegaban tarde o se marchaban demasiado pronto no era asunto suyo. Mrs. Moore dormía recostada contra las varas del palanquín; Mohammed Latif la sostenía de manera eficaz y respetuosa a la vez, y a su lado se hallaba Fielding, a quien ya empezaba a llamar «Cyril» en su interior.

—Aziz, ¿ha calculado lo que va a costarle esta excursión?

—Chsss… No me hable de eso, mi querido amigo. Cientos y cientos de rupias. El total de gastos será una cosa terrible; los criados de mis amigos me han robado a diestro y siniestro, y en cuanto a la elefanta, se diría que come oro. Ya sé que usted no va a repetir lo que le digo. En cuanto a M. L. (haga el favor de no emplear más que las iniciales, porque está escuchando) es con mucho el peor de todos.

—Ya le dije que no le iría bien con él.

—A él le va muy bien consigo mismo, pero su falta de honradez me arruinará.

—¡Eso es monstruoso!

—En realidad estoy muy contento con él; ha hecho que mis huéspedes se sientan a gusto. Además, estoy obligado a emplearlo porque es mi primo. Si el dinero se va, viene más dinero. Si el dinero se queda, viene la muerte. ¿No ha oído nunca este útil refrán urdu? Probablemente no, porque acabo de inventarlo.

—Mis refranes son: Penique ahorrado es penique ganado; una untada a tiempo evita un ciento; mira antes de saltar. El Imperio británico descansa sobre ellos. Nunca nos echarán ustedes de aquí, se lo aseguro, mientras sigan empleando a M. L. y a otros parecidos.

—¿Echarles? ¿Por qué tendría yo que molestarme en hacer un trabajo tan sucio? Se lo dejo a los políticos… No; cuando era estudiante me indignaban mucho sus malditos compatriotas, eso es cierto; pero ahora sólo quiero que me dejen salir adelante con mi profesión y no se muestren demasiado groseros conmigo oficialmente…, no pido nada más.

—Pero sí que lo hace; les lleva de excursión.

—Esta excursión no tiene nada que ver con ingleses o indios; es tan sólo una reunión de amigos.

Así se terminó el trayecto a lomos de elefante, de manera en parte agradable y en parte no; recogieron al cocinero brahmán, llegó el tren arrastrando su garganta en llamas sobre la llanura, y el siglo XX sustituyó al XVI. Mrs. Moore entró en su vagón, los tres hombres fueron al suyo, bajaron las cortinillas, pusieron en marcha el ventilador eléctrico y trataron

de descabezar un sueño. En la penumbra del departamento todos parecían cadáveres, y el mismo tren parecía muerto aunque se moviera: un ataúd llegado del Norte científico que descomponía el paisaje cuatro veces al día. Al alejarse de las colinas, el desagradable microcosmos que habían habitado durante la mañana desapareció, dando paso al espectáculo de Marabar visto desde lejos, de límites muy precisos y un aire más bien romántico. El tren se detuvo una vez bajo una bomba de agua, para humedecer el carbón almacenado en el ténder. Luego divisó a lo lejos la línea principal, cobró ánimos, reanudó su traqueteo, dejó a un lado la zona residencial inglesa, cruzó el paso a nivel (los raíles estaban ahora abrasando), y se detuvo por fin con notable estrépito. ¡Chandrapore, Chandrapore! La expedición había terminado.

Y mientras se hallaban aún sentados en la oscuridad, preparándose para volver a la vida ordinaria, la pesada atmósfera de irrealidad que había dominado la mañana se concretó de repente. Mr. Haq, el inspector de Policía, abrió de golpe la puerta del vagón y dijo con voz estridente:

—Doctor Aziz, me veo en el muy penoso deber de arrestarle.

—Vaya, algún error —dijo Fielding, tomando inmediatamente la voz cantante en la situación.

—Esas son mis instrucciones, señor. No sé nada más.

—¿De qué se le acusa?

—Tengo instrucciones de no decirlo.

—No me conteste de esa manera. Enséñeme la orden de detención.

—Perdóneme, pero no se necesita una orden en este caso particular. Consulte con Mr. McBryde.

—Muy bien, eso es lo que haremos. Vamos, Aziz; no hay que preocuparse, se trata de alguna equivocación.

—Doctor Aziz, ¿hará el favor de acompañarme? Hay un vehículo cerrado que nos está esperando.

El joven médico gimió —su primer sonido— e inició un intento de escapar saltando a la vía por la puerta del otro lado.

—Eso me obligará a usar la fuerza —gimió Mr. Haq.

—¡Por el amor de Dios! —exclamó Fielding, contagiado del nerviosismo general. Sujetó a Aziz antes de que estallara un escándalo y lo zarandeó como si fuera un niño. Un segundo más tarde habrían sonado los silbatos, iniciándose la caza del hombre—. Vamos a ir juntos a ver a McBryde y a enterarnos de lo que pasa. Es una persona decente, tiene que ser una equivocación…, se disculpará. Nunca actúe usted como si fuera culpable.

—¡Mis hijos y mi nombre! —jadeó Aziz, las alas rotas.

—Nada de eso. Enderécese el sombrero y cójase de mi brazo. Iré con usted.

—¡Gracias a Dios! Viene por su propio pie —exclamó el inspector.

Aziz y Fielding salieron al calor del mediodía cogidos del brazo. El andén hervía de agitación. Pasajeros y mozos surgieron de todos los escondrijos, y también funcionarios del Gobierno y más policías. Ronny se hizo cargo de Mrs. Moore. Mohammed Latif empezó a gemir. Y antes de que pudiera abrirse camino a través del caos, Fielding se vio reclamado por la voz autoritaria de Mr. Turton y Aziz fue solo a la cárcel.

Capítulo decimoséptimo

El Administrador había presenciado la detención de Aziz desde el interior de la sala de espera, y, al abrirse las puertas de cinc con perforaciones, Mr. Turton quedó expuesto como un dios dentro de su santuario. Después de entrar Fielding, las puertas, custodiadas por un criado, se cerraron de golpe, mientras un *punkah*, para señalar la importancia del momento, agitaba sucios trozos de tela sobre sus cabezas. El Administrador no pudo hablar al principio. Su rostro estaba muy pálido, con una expresión de fanatismo que le hacía parecer bastante hermoso; aquella expresión era la que iban a asumir los rostros de todos los ingleses de Chandrapore durante muchos días. Siempre valeroso y altruista, Mr. Turton estaba ahora dominado por algún generoso y ardiente sentimiento; era evidente que se hubiera matado si considerase que al hacerlo tomaba la decisión más acertada. Finalmente habló:

—Nunca había sucedido nada semejante en toda mi carrera —dijo—. Miss Quested ha sido insultada en una de las Cuevas de Marabar.

—No, no, no puede ser —jadeó el otro, sintiendo que estaba a punto de marearse.

—Logró escapar…, gracias a Dios.

—No, no; no puede haber sido Aziz… Aziz no…

El otro hizo un gesto afirmativo con la cabeza.

—Absolutamente imposible, grotesco.

—Le he llamado para evitarle las reacciones de indignación que se producirían contra usted si se le viera acompañando al detenido a la comisaría —dijo Turton, sin prestar atención a las protestas de Fielding; casi sin oírlas, en realidad.

El Director del Instituto repitió: «No, no», como un estúpido. No conseguía articular otras palabras. Advertía que había surgido una inmensa masa de locura que trataba de arrollarlos a todos; era preciso devolverla a la sima de donde había salido, pero él no sabía cómo hacerlo, porque no entendía la locura; siempre había avanzado por la vida razonable y tranquilamente hasta que se presentaba una dificultad.

—¿Quién ha presentado esa vil acusación? —preguntó, tratando de serenarse.

—Miss Derek y… la misma víctima…

La voz de Turton casi se quebró, incapaz de repetir el nombre de la muchacha.

—¿Miss Quested en persona acusa al doctor Aziz de…?

El Administrador asintió con un gesto de cabeza, apartando el rostro.

—Entonces es que está loca.

—No puedo pasar por alto ese último comentario —dijo Mr. Turton, tomando por fin conciencia de que Fielding y él no estaban de acuerdo, y temblando de indignación—. Retírela inmediatamente. Es el tipo de observación que se ha permitido usted hacer desde que llegó a Chandrapore.

—Lo siento muchísimo; y desde luego la retiro incondicionalmente.

Porque él mismo se había vuelto también medio loco.

—Dígame, Mr. Fielding, ¿qué le ha inducido a hablarme en ese tono?

—La noticia ha sido para mí una sorpresa muy desagradable, le ruego que me perdone. No puedo creer que el doctor Aziz sea culpable.

Turton dio un puñetazo sobre la mesa.

—Eso…, eso es una repetición aún más grave del mismo insulto.

—Si se me permite decirlo, creo que no —replicó Fielding, palideciendo intensamente, pero sin dar su brazo a torcer—. No pongo en

duda la buena fe de las dos señoritas, pero la acusación que han presentado se basa en una equivocación y bastarían cinco minutos para aclararlo. Aziz se ha estado comportando de manera perfectamente natural; además, sé que es incapaz de cometer semejante infamia.

—Se basa efectivamente en una equivocación —anunció la voz estrangulada y cortante del otro—. Así es, efectivamente. Tengo una experiencia de veinticinco años en este país —hizo una pausa, y los «veinticinco años» dieron la impresión de llenar la sala de espera con su aridez y su egoísmo—, y durante esos veinticinco años siempre he visto que el único resultado de que ingleses e indios traten de intimar es el desastre. Comunicación, sí. Cortesía, sin duda alguna. Intimidad, nunca, nunca. Todo el peso de mi autoridad está en contra de ello. Chandrapore lleva seis años a mi cargo, y si todo ha ido sobre ruedas, si ha habido respeto y aprecio mutuos, es porque ambos pueblos se han atenido a esta regla tan simple. Los recién llegados dan de lado nuestras tradiciones, y en un instante sucede lo que está usted viendo; el trabajo de años queda destruido y el buen nombre de mi distrito arruinado para toda una generación. No soy capaz de…, de ver el fin del trabajo qué empezamos hoy, Mr. Fielding. Usted, que está empapado de ideas modernas, podrá sin duda hacerlo. Yo quisiera no haber vivido para verlo empezar, de eso estoy seguro. Esto es el fin para mí. Que una señorita, que una joven, prometida al colaborador que más aprecio…, que ella…, una chica recién llegada de Inglaterra…, que yo haya tenido que vivir…

Dominado por sus propias emociones, Mr. Turton fue incapaz de continuar. Lo que había dicho era muy serio y resultaba muy patético, pero ¿tenía algo que ver con Aziz? Nada en absoluto, si Fielding estaba en lo cierto. Es imposible ver una tragedia desde dos puntos de vista al mismo tiempo, y, mientras Turton había decidido tomar venganza por el agravio contra Miss Quested, el Director del Instituto confiaba en salvar al hombre. Fielding quería marcharse y hablar con McBryde, que siempre se había mostrado amistoso con él y era una persona razonable; cabía confiar, por tanto, en que no perdiera la cabeza.

—He venido aquí pensando en usted especialmente mientras el pobre Heaslop se llevaba a su madre. Me ha parecido que era la mejor muestra de amistad que podía darle. Quería decirle que vamos a celebrar una reunión en el Club esta noche para analizar la situación, pero dudo que quiera usted venir. Se le ve muy poco por allí.

—Naturalmente que iré; y le agradezco mucho tocias las molestias que se ha tomado por causa mía. ¿Puedo atreverme a preguntar dónde está Miss Quested?

El Administrador replicó con un gesto: se hallaba enferma.

—Peor que peor, terrible —dijo Fielding, sinceramente afectado.

Pero Mr. Turton le miró con severidad, porque seguía conservando la calma. No había perdido la cabeza ante la frase «una chica recién llegada de Inglaterra»; no se había agrupado inmediatamente bajo el estandarte de la raza. Insistía en buscar los hechos, aunque el rebaño se hubiese decidido por las emociones. Nada enfurece tanto a la India inglesa como la lámpara de la razón, si se la muestra, aunque sea sólo por un momento, después de decretarse su desaparición. Aquel día todos los europeos de Chandrapore estaban prescindiendo de su forma de ser habitual para identificarse con la comunidad. Se sentían llenos de compasión, de rabia y de heroísmo, pero no eran capaces de sumar dos y dos.

Dando por terminada la entrevista, el Administrador salió al andén, donde reinaba una terrible confusión. A uno de los *chuprassis* de Ronny le habían encargado que recogiera algunas menudencias que pertenecían a las señoras y estaba apoderándose, para su propio uso, de otros objetos que no le pertenecían; era un partidario délos enfurecidos ingleses. Mohammed Latif no hizo el menor intento de oponérsele. Hassan se quitó el turbante con gran violencia y empezó a llorar. Toda la impedimenta tan generosamente preparada para la excursión había rodado por el suelo. Mr. Turton se hizo cargo de la situación con una mirada, y su sentido de la justicia se impuso a pesar de la indignación que le dominaba. Dio las órdenes necesarias y cesó el pillaje. Luego tomó el camino de su bungalow dando otra vez rienda suelta a sus pasiones. Al ver a los peones dormidos en las zanjas o a los tenderos que se levantaban para saludarle, se dijo a sí

mismo: «Por fin sé cómo sois; vais a tener que pagar por esto, os aseguro que gritaréis antes de que terminemos con vosotros,»

Capítulo decimoctavo

Mr. McBryde, el Superintendente de la Policía en el distrito de Chandrapore, era, entre todos los funcionarios de la zona, el más ponderado y de más amplia educación. Había leído y pensado mucho, llegando a desarrollar, debido a un matrimonio hasta cierto punto desgraciado, una completa filosofía de la vida. En su actitud existía un gran componente de cinismo, acompañado de una ausencia total de bravuconería; nunca perdía la calma ni trataba a nadie groseramente, y a Aziz le recibió con cortesía, mostrándose casi tranquilizador.

—Tengo que detenerle hasta que consiga usted la libertad bajo fianza —dijo—; estoy seguro de que sus amigos la solicitarán y, desde luego, se les permitirá visitarle, de acuerdo con el reglamento. A mí se me ha proporcionado cierta información y tengo que actuar de acuerdo con ella, pero yo no soy su juez.

Aziz salió llorando del despacho. A Mr. McBryde le había disgustado la caída del joven médico, pero los indios no le sorprendían ya nunca, porque el Superintendente mantenía una teoría personal sobre las zonas climáticas. La teoría funcionaba como sigue: «Todos los nativos son delincuentes en el fondo de su corazón, por el simple motivo de que viven al sur del paralelo treinta. No hay que echarles la culpa, no tienen la más mínima posibilidad…, seríamos como ellos si nos instaláramos aquí.» Como él

mismo había nacido en Karachi, parecía contradecir su propia teoría y, en ocasiones, llegaba a admitirlo con una sonrisa llena de calma y de tristeza.

«Ya hemos desenmascarado a otro más», pensó, mientras se disponía a redactar el informe para el Magistrado. La llegada de Fielding interrumpió su tarea. El Superintendente le explicó lo que sabía, sin reservas de ninguna clase. Miss Derek se había presentado conduciendo ella misma el automóvil de Mudkul una hora antes, poco más o menos, y tanto ella como Miss Quested se hallaban en un terrible estado. Habían ido directamente al bungalow de McBryde, donde él se encontraba por casualidad, y allí y en aquel mismo momento les había tomado declaración y cursado las instrucciones para detener a Aziz en la estación.

—¿De qué se le acusa, exactamente?

—De haber seguido a Miss Quested al interior de la cueva y de haberle hecho requerimientos obscenos. Ella le golpeó con sus prismáticos; él trató de quitárselos y se rompió la correa, y así fue como Miss Quested logró escapar. Al registrar a Aziz ahora mismo, le hemos encontrado los gemelos en el bolsillo.

—No, no; estoy seguro de que esto se puede aclarar en cinco minutos —exclamó Fielding de nuevo.

—Véalos usted mismo.

La correa se había roto hacía muy poco y la pieza para ajustar el enfoque estaba atascada. La lógica de las pruebas decía «Culpable».

—¿Miss Quested ha contado algo más?

—Mencionó un eco que parecía haberla asustado. ¿Ha entrado usted en esas cuevas?

—He visto una de ellas. Había un eco. ¿Sabe si la puso muy nerviosa?

—No me ha parecido oportuno abrumarla con preguntas. Ya tendrá que pasar un rato muy malo cuando declare en el juicio. Más vale no pensar en lo que van a ser las próximas semanas. Me gustaría que las Colinas de Marabar y todo lo que contienen estuvieran en el fondo del mar. Noche tras noche se las ve desde el Club, y no eran más que un nombre inofensivo… Sí, ya empezamos. —Porque acababan de traerle una tarjeta de visita: el *Vakil* Mahmoud Ali, abogado del prisionero, quería que se le permitiera

verlo. McBryde suspiró, dio su consentimiento, y continuó—: He oído algunas cosas más de labios de Miss Derek; es una antigua amiga nuestra y habla sin reservas; dice que usted se alejó en busca del campamento, y que casi al mismo tiempo oyó caer piedras del Kawa Dol y vio a Miss Quested bajando en línea recta por una pared cortada a pico. Miss Derek trepó por una especie de barranco para alcanzarla, y la encontró prácticamente extenuada…, había perdido el casco…

—¿No había un guía con ella? —le interrumpió Fielding.

—No. Se había metido entre unos cactos. Miss Derek le salvó la vida presentándose en aquel momento, porque estaba empezando a perder el control de sus miembros. La ayudó a llegar hasta el coche. Miss Quested no soportaba ver al chófer indio y gritó: «Que no se acerque»…, y eso fue lo que puso a nuestra amiga sobre la pista de lo que había sucedido. Fueron directamente a nuestro bungalow, y allí están ahora. Eso es todo lo que sé de la historia hasta este momento. Miss Derek ordenó al chófer que se reuniera con usted. Creo que se ha comportado con mucho sentido común.

—¿Existe alguna posibilidad de que vea a Miss Quested? —preguntó Fielding de pronto.

—Creo que no sería nada oportuno, desde luego.

—Me temía que fuera usted a decir eso. Me gustaría mucho poder verla.

—No está en condiciones de hablar con nadie. Además, usted no la conoce bien.

—Nada, prácticamente… Pero, ¿sabe usted?, creo que Miss Quested es victima de un terrible error, y que ese desgraciado muchacho es inocente.

El policía inicio un movimiento de sorpresa, y su rostro se ensombreció por un momento, ya que le desagradaba terriblemente tener que reconsiderar sus decisiones.

—No imaginaba que pensara usted así —dijo, y, en busca de apoyo, bajó la vista hacia la declaración firmada que tenía delante.

—Esos prismáticos me desconcertaron por un momento, pero es imposible que después de agredirla Aziz se guardara los gemelos en el bolsillo.

—Mucho me temo que es perfectamente posible; cuando un indio se echa a perder, no sólo se echa a perder completamente, sino que se vuelve muy raro.

—No le entiendo.

—¿Cómo podría hacerlo? Cuando usted piensa en delincuencia, piensa en delincuencia inglesa. Aquí la psicología es diferente. Estoy seguro de que va usted a decirme que Aziz se comportó con la mayor normalidad cuando bajó a recibirle, de vuelta de las cuevas. No hay razón para que no lo hiciera. Lea las crónicas de la revolución de los cipayos[4], que debería ser su Biblia en este país, más que el Bhagavad Gita[5]. Aunque es posible que exista una íntima conexión entre los dos. Digo unas cosas atroces, ¿no es cierto? Pero tenga en cuenta, Fielding, como ya le expliqué en otra ocasión, que usted es profesor, y en consecuencia trata a estas gentes en la mejor época de su vida. Eso es lo que le hace equivocarse. De muchachos pueden ser encantadores, Pero yo los conozco tal como son realmente, después de haberse convertido en hombres. Fíjese en esto, por ejemplo. —McBryde le mostró la cartera de Aziz—. Estoy examinando las cosas que contiene. No son edificantes. Aquí hay una carta de un amigo que, al parecer, dirige un burdel.

—No deseo enterarme de su correspondencia privada.

—Habrá que mencionarlo en el juicio, en relación con su moralidad. Estaba arreglando los detalles para verse con mujeres en Calcuta.

—Ya está bien, ya está bien.

McBryde guardó silencio, ingenuamente sorprendido. Para él era evidente que dos ingleses podían compartir todo lo que supieran sobre cualquier indio, y no entendía el sentido de aquella objeción.

—Quizá tenga usted derecho a criticar a un joven por hacer eso, pero *yo* no lo tengo. Hice lo mismo que él cuando tenía su edad.

El Superintendente de la Policía se hallaba en el mismo caso, pero consideró que la conversación estaba tomando un cariz poco agradable. Tampoco le pareció bien la pregunta que Fielding le hizo a continuación.

—Entonces, ¿no hay ninguna posibilidad de ver a Miss Quested? ¿Está usted completamente seguro?

—Todavía no me ha explicado qué es lo que se propone. ¿Para qué demonios quiere usted verla?

—Por si existe alguna posibilidad de que se desdiga antes de que usted mande ese informe; después no quedará más remedio que juzgar a Aziz, y todo el asunto se irá al diablo. Vamos a no discutir esto, y hágame el favor de llamar a su mujer o a Miss Derek y enterarse. No le cuesta nada hacerlo.

—No sirve de nada llamarlas a ellas —replicó McBryde extendiendo la mano hacia el teléfono—. Es Callendar quien tiene que resolver un asunto como éste. No parece usted darse cuenta de que Miss Quested está seriamente enferma.

—Seguro que va a decir que no; no vive para otra cosa —dijo el otro con tono de desesperación.

En seguida recibieron la esperada respuesta: el Mayor no quería oír hablar de que se molestara a la enferma.

—Sólo deseo preguntarle si está segura, completamente segura, de que fue Aziz quien la siguió al interior de la cueva.

—Eso se lo podría incluso preguntar mi esposa.

—Pero quiero ser yo quien se lo pregunte. Quiero que sea alguien que crea en Aziz.

—¿Y qué más da quien lo haga?

—Miss Quested está entre personas que desconfían de los indios.

—Bueno, pero es ella la que cuenta la historia, ¿no es cierto?

—Ya lo sé, pero se la cuenta a ustedes. McBryde alzó las cejas, murmurando:

—Me parece que hila usted demasiado fino. De todas formas, Callendar no quiere oír hablar de que la vea usted. Siento decir que no me ha dado buenas noticias. Al parecer no está en absoluto fuera de peligro.

Los dos se quedaron callados. Trajeron otra tarjeta de visita al despacho: la de Hamidullah. El ejército enemigo estaba cerrando filas.

—Tengo que terminar este informe, Fielding.

—Me gustaría que no lo continuara.

—¿Cómo podría hacer una cosa así?

—Mi impresión es que todo esto es muy poco satisfactorio, además de absolutamente desastroso. Vamos de cabeza a darnos un golpe tremendo. Supongo que podré ver al detenido. McBryde dudó.

—Parece que ya está en contacto con la gente de su raza.

—Bueno, cuando haya terminado de hablar con ellos.

—No le haría esperar, por supuesto; tiene usted precedencia sobre cualquier visitante indio. Lo que quiero decir es: ¿qué sentido tiene? ¿Por qué mancharse las manos?

—Yo mantengo que es inocente…

—Inocente o culpable, ¿qué necesidad hay de mezclarse? ¿Qué va usted a conseguir con ello?

—Conseguir, conseguir —exclamó Fielding, sintiendo que se le cerraban todos los caminos—. Uno tiene que respirar de vez en cuando, yo al menos tengo que hacerlo. No es posible ver a Miss Quested y ahora tampoco puedo ver a Aziz. Le prometí venir con él aquí, pero Turton me llamó casi antes de que empezara a andar.

—Un típico gesto perfectamente británico de nuestro Administrador —murmuró McBryde con tono conmovido. Luego, tratando de no adoptar un aire protector, extendió la mano sobre la mesa, y dijo—: Amigo mío, mucho me temo que vamos a tener que estar todos unidos. No ignoro que soy más joven que usted, pero llevo muchos años de funcionario; no conoce este venenoso país tan bien como yo y debe creerme cuando le digo que durante las próximas semanas la situación en Chandrapore va a ser desagradable, francamente desagradable.

—No hace usted más que repetir mis palabras.

—Pero en un momento como éste no hay lugar para…, bueno…, para puntos de vista personales. El que se sale de la fila está perdido.

—Ya veo lo que quiere usted decir.

—No, no del todo. El que discrepa no sólo se pierde a sí mismo, sino que debilita a sus amigos. Si se sale usted de la línea, deja un vacío. Esos chacales —señaló las tarjetas de los abogados— están todos al acecho esperando encontrar un punto débil.

—¿Puedo visitar a Aziz? —fue la respuesta de Fielding.

—No. —Ahora que sabía cuál era la actitud de Turton, el Superintendente no tuvo dudas—. Podrá verlo si consigue el permiso de un magistrado, pero yo solo no me atrevo a asumir la responsabilidad de haber autorizado esa visita. Podría dar origen a más complicaciones.

Fielding guardó silencio un momento, pensando que si hubiese tenido diez años menos o vivido diez años más en la India, habría respondido al llamamiento de McBryde. Después, reafirmándose en su decisión, preguntó:

—¿A quién tengo que dirigirme para solicitar ese permiso?

—Al Magistrado Municipal.

—¡La persona ideal!.

—Sí, no parece que esté justificado molestar al pobre Heaslop.

Más «pruebas» hicieron su aparición en aquel momento: el cajón de la mesa del bungalow de Aziz, que un cabo traía en brazos con gesto triunfal.

—Fotografías de mujeres. ¡Vaya!

—Es su esposa —dijo Fielding, con una profunda sensación de vergüenza.

—¿Cómo lo sabe?

—Me lo dijo él.

McBryde sonrió incrédulamente y empezó a examinar el contenido del cajón. En su rostro apareció una expresión inquisitiva y algo brutal. «Su esposa; ¡de sobra sé yo quiénes son esas esposas!», estaba pensando. Pero en voz alta elijo:

—Bueno, amigo mío, tendrá usted que marcharse, y que Dios nos ayude, que Dios nos ayude a todos…

Y como si su plegaria hubiera sido escuchada, la campana de un templo empezó a tañer destempladamente.

Capítulo decimonoveno

Hamidullah era el paso siguiente. Estaba esperando a la puerta del despacho del Superintendente, y se puso en pie respetuosamente cuando vio a Fielding. Ante el apasionado «Todo esto no es más que una equivocación» del inglés, respondió:

—¿Es que ha aparecido ya alguna prueba?

—Aparecerán —dijo Fielding, cogiéndole de la mano.

—Sí, Mr. Fielding; pero una vez que un indio ha sido detenido, no sabemos dónde acabará. —Su actitud era respetuosa—. Es muy de agradecer que me salude usted en público de esta manera. Sé apreciar su gesto en todo lo que vale; pero, Mr. Fielding, sólo las pruebas consiguen convencer a un magistrado. ¿Mr. McBryde hizo alguna observación cuando le entregaron mi tarjeta? ¿Cree usted que mi solicitud le molestó y que podría predisponerle contra mi amigo? Si es así, la retiraría gustosamente.

—No le ha molestado, pero si así fuera, ¿qué más da?

—Para usted es muy fácil hablar así, pero nosotros tenemos que vivir en este país.

El abogado más importante de Chandrapore, con sus modales rebosantes de dignidad y su título de Cambridge, estaba asustado. También él quería a Aziz y sabía que se trataba de una calumnia; pero la fe no gobernaba su corazón, y hablaba de «planes» y de «pruebas» de una manera

que entristecía al inglés. También Fielding tenía sus preocupaciones —no le gustaba el asunto de los prismáticos ni la discrepancia sobre el guía—, pero las había relegado a un rincón de su mente y les prohibía contagiar su parte más vital. Aziz *era* inocente: toda posible acción tenía que partir de ahí: las personas que le consideraban culpable estaban equivocadas, y carecía de sentido tratar de apaciguarlas. En el momento en que se disponía a compartir la suerte de los indios, Fielding se dio cuenta de toda la distancia que le separaba de ellos. Los indios siempre hacen alguna cosa decepcionante. Aziz había tratado de escapar de la policía; Mohammed Latif no se había opuesto al pillaje. ¡Y ahora Hamidullah! En lugar de enfadarse y denunciar, contemporizaba. ¿Son cobardes los indios? No, pero les cuesta mucho empezar y a veces dan marcha atrás. El miedo está en todas partes; el dominio británico descansa sobre él; el respeto y la cortesía de que Fielding disfrutaba eran gestos inconscientes de conciliación. El Director del Instituto le dijo a Hamidullah que se alegrase; todo terminaría bien; y Hamidullah se animó, volviéndose beligerante y atendiendo a razones. Aquello era una clara ilustración del comentario de McBryde: «Si se sale usted de la línea, deja un vacío.»

—Lo primero y más importante es el asunto de la fianza… Había que presentar la solicitud aquella misma tarde. Fielding quería salir fiador. Hamidullah era partidario de proponérselo al Nabab Bahadur.

—Pero ¿por qué mezclarlo a él en esto? Que todo el mundo interviniera era precisamente el propósito del abogado. Después sugirió que el defensor fuera un hindú; de esa manera el caso tendría un atractivo más amplio. Mencionó uno o dos nombres —personas que vivían lejos y no se dejarían intimidar por la situación local—, y dijo que preferiría a Amritrao, un abogado de Calcuta que tenía una gran reputación profesional y personal, pero era también muy conocido por sus sentimientos antibritánicos.

Fielding puso reparos; aquello le parecía irse al otro extremo. Aziz tenía que ser declarado inocente, pero con un mínimo de enfrentamiento racial. A Amritrao se le odiaba en el Club. Contratarlo se consideraría como un desafío político.

—No, no; tenemos que atacar con toda nuestra fuerza. Cuando he visto pasar hace un momento a un sucio policía con los papeles privados de mi amigo, me he dicho a mí mismo: «Amritrao es el hombre capaz de arreglar esto.»

Se produjo una pausa llena de tristeza. La campana del templo seguía sonando ásperamente. Aquel interminable y desastroso día apenas había alcanzado aún las primeras horas de la tarde. Continuando su trabajo, los engranajes del Gobierno llevaron un mensajero a caballo desde el despacho del Superintendente al del Magistrado Municipal con un informe oficial sobre la detención.

—No compliquemos las cosas; vamos a jugar con las cartas que tenemos —suplicó Fielding, mientras veía desaparecer al jinete en una nube de polvo—. Tenemos que ganar forzosamente, no puede ser de otra manera. Miss Quested nunca será capaz de probar su acusación.

Esto consoló a Hamidullah, que hizo notar con absoluta sinceridad:

—Ante una crisis los ingleses son inigualables.

—Hasta pronto, entonces, Hamidullah (ya podemos abandonar el «Mr.»). Déle a Aziz mis recuerdos más afectuosos cuando le vea, y dígale que conserve la calma por encima de todo. Ahora vuelvo al Instituto. Si me necesita, llámeme; si no, no lo haga, porque estaré muy ocupado.

—Hasta pronto; ¿está usted realmente de nuestro lado, contra su propio pueblo?

—Si. Completamente.

Fielding sentía tener que tomar partido. Su meta era pasar por la India sin que le colgaran una etiqueta. De ahora en adelante le llamarían «antibritánico» y «sedicioso», términos que le aburrían y que disminuían su utilidad. Preveía que, además de tragedia, aquel asunto sería germen de confusión; divisaba ya varios sitios donde la madeja se enredaba y cada vez que volvía los ojos en aquella dirección, los nudos se hacían más espesos. Por haber nacido en libertad, a Fielding no le asustaba la confusión, pero sí era capaz de reconocer su existencia.

Aquel fragmento de día terminó en una extraña charla con el profesor Goobole. El inacabable asunto de la víbora de Russell[6] estaba nuevamente

de actualidad. Varias semanas antes, uno de los profesores del Instituto, un parsi muy impopular, había encontrado una víbora de Russell curioseando alrededor de su clase. Quizás había reptado hasta allí por sí misma, pero quizá no, y los miembros del claustro de profesores seguían visitando al Director para hablar de ello, y hacerle perder el tiempo con sus teorías. Se trataba de un reptil tan venenoso que Fielding prefería no negarse a escucharlos, y los profesores lo sabían. De manera que, mientras su mente estaba ocupada hasta rebosar por otros problemas y reflexionaba sobre la conveniencia de redactar una carta de súplica a Miss Quested, Fielding se vio obligado a escuchar un discurso que carecía de fundamento y de conclusión y se limitaba a flotar por el espacio. Al terminar su exposición, Godbole dijo:

—¿Puedo retirarme ahora? —Cosa que era siempre una indicación de que aún no había dicho lo más importante—. Antes de irme quiero decirle que me alegro mucho de que después de todo lograra usted llegar a las Colinas de Marabar. Temía que mi falta de puntualidad se lo hubiera impedido, pero sé que ha ido usted en el coche de Miss Derek (un método mucho más agradable). Confío en que la expedición haya sido un éxito.

—Veo que no se ha enterado usted de las últimas noticias.

—Sí, sí.

—Creo que no; se ha producido una terrible catástrofe relacionada con Aziz.

—Sí, sí. Ya se sabe por todo el Instituto.

—En ese caso, no veo cómo una excursión en la que sucede una cosa semejante puede considerarse un éxito —dijo Fielding con una mirada en la que se reflejaba su asombro.

—No sabría decirlo. Yo no estaba presente. Fielding miró de nuevo a Godbole: una operación perfectamente inútil, porque ningún ojo podía ver lo que se hallaba en el fondo de la mente del brahmán, y, sin embargo, tenía una mente y también un corazón, y todos sus amigos confiaban en él, sin saber por qué.

—Estoy terriblemente angustiado —dijo Fielding.

—Eso he visto nada más entrar en su despacho. No quisiera abusar de su paciencia, pero me encuentro con una pequeña dificultad de carácter privado y quisiera que usted me ayudara; como sabe, voy a abandonar el Instituto dentro de poco.

—Sí, desgraciadamente.

—Regreso a mi lugar de nacimiento en la India central para encargarme allí de la educación. Quiero empezar una escuela secundaria con sólidas directrices inglesas y que se parezca lo más posible a nuestro Instituto.

—¿Y bien? —suspiró Fielding, tratando de interesarse.

—Actualmente en Mau sólo se imparte educación en el idioma local. Considero que será deber mío cambiar todo eso. Aconsejaré a Su Alteza que apruebe por lo menos una escuela secundaria en la capital y si es posible otra en cada *pargana*.

Fielding hundió la cabeza entre los brazos; a veces los indios eran realmente insoportables.

—El problema…, el problema para el que solicito su ayuda es éste: ¿qué nombre debería dársele a la escuela?

—¿Un nombre? ¿Un nombre para una escuela? —dijo Fielding, sintiendo de pronto que iba a marearse, como le había sucedido en la sala de espera.

—Sí, un nombre, un título adecuado con el que se la pueda designar y por el que llegue a conocérsela.

—Lo siento…, pero no se me ocurren nombres para escuelas. Sólo puedo pensar en nuestro pobre Aziz. ¿Se da usted cuenta de que en este momento está en la cárcel?

—Sí, desde luego. Y no; no espero que conteste usted ahora a mi pregunta. Sólo pretendía que cuando tuviera usted tiempo pensara un poco en ello y sugiriera dos o tres nombres posibles. Yo había pensado en «Escuela Secundaria de Mr. Fielding», y si ése no le parecía bien, «del Rey-Emperador Jorge V».

—¡Godbole!

El anciano brahmán unió las manos y en su rostro apareció una expresión sagaz, llena de atractivo.

—¿Aziz es culpable o inocente?

—Eso ha de decidirlo el tribunal. El veredicto estará totalmente de acuerdo con las pruebas presentadas, no tengo la menor duda.

—Sí, sí, pero lo que yo quiero es su opinión personal. Se trata de un hombre por el que los dos sentimos afecto y que goza de general estima; vive aquí tranquilamente haciendo su trabajo. Bien» ¿qué conclusión se puede sacar? ¿Sería o no sería capaz de hacer una cosa así?

—¡Ah! Ésa es una pregunta algo distinta de la anterior y bastante más difícil: quiero decir difícil de acuerdo con nuestra filosofía. El doctor Aziz es un joven muy estimable; siento un gran respeto por él; pero creo que me está usted preguntando si una persona concreta puede llevar a cabo buenas o malas acciones, y eso es bastante difícil para nosotros.

Godbole hablaba sin manifestar ninguna emoción y dividiendo las palabras en sílabas que se tropezaban unas con otras.

—Lo que yo le pregunto es: ¿lo hizo o no lo hizo? ¿Queda así suficientemente claro? Yo sé que no lo hizo, y empiezo a partir de ahí. Estoy decidido a hallar la verdadera explicación en un par de días. Mi última hipótesis es que fue el guía que los acompañaba. No puede ser mala voluntad por parte de Miss Quested, aunque Hamidullah lo crea así. No hay duda de que la pobre muchacha ha sufrido una terrible experiencia. Pero usted me dice que no, porque el bien y el mal son lo mismo.

—No, perdone, no es por eso exactamente, según nuestra filosofía, sino porque nada se puede realizar de manera aislada. Todo el mundo realiza la buena acción que alguien lleva a cabo, y también, cuando se trata de una mala acción, todo el mundo participa en ella. Para ilustrar lo que quiero decir, permítame que use como ejemplo el caso que nos ocupa. Se me informa de que en las Colinas de Marabar se ha llevado a cabo una mala acción y que, como resultado, una dama inglesa muy estimada se encuentra ahora gravemente enferma. Mi respuesta es la siguiente: esa acción fue realizada por el doctor Aziz. —Hizo una pausa y sus chupadas mejillas se hundieron aún más hacia el interior de la boca—. Fue realizada por el guía. —Se detuvo de nuevo—. Fue realizada por usted. —Ahora adoptó un aire de audacia y de timidez al mismo tiempo—. Fue realizada por mí. —Miró

modestamente el interior de la manga de su chaqueta—. Y por mis alumnos. Incluso por la misma dama en cuestión. Cuando el mal se produce, expresa la totalidad del universo. Lo mismo sucede con el bien.

—Y también con el sufrimiento, etc., y todo es cualquier cosa y nada es algo —murmuró Fielding, irritado, porque necesitaba un suelo firme donde pisar.

—Perdóneme, pero está usted cambiando de nuevo las bases de nuestra discusión. Estamos hablando del bien y del mal. El sufrimiento es sólo un problema personal. Si una joven sufre una insolación, ese hecho carece de significado para el universo. No, no tiene ningún valor, ni el más mínimo. Es un problema aislado, que sólo le concierne a ella. Si pensara que no le dolía la cabeza, no estaría enferma y ahí terminaría todo. Pero resulta completamente distinto si se trata del bien y del mal. No son lo que nosotros pensamos, son lo que son, y cada uno de nosotros ha contribuido en ambos.

—Está usted defendiendo que el bien y el mal son lo mismo.

—No, no; perdóneme de nuevo. El bien y el mal son diferentes, como su nombre indica. Pero, en mi humilde opinión, los dos son aspectos de mi Señor, que está presente en uno y ausente en el otro, y la diferencia entre presencia y ausencia es grande, al menos dentro de lo que mi débil mente es capaz de percibir. Sin embargo, ausencia implica presencia; ausencia no es inexistencia, y, por tanto, está justificado que repitamos: «Ven, ven, ven, ven». —Y sin pararse a respirar, y como para borrar la belleza que sus palabras hubieran podido contener, Godbole añadió—: Pero ¿tuvo usted tiempo para visitar alguna de las interesantes antigüedades de Malabar?

Fielding guardó silencio, tratando de meditar y de dar un descanso a su cerebro.

—¿Ni siquiera vio usted el estanque junto al sitio donde suele acamparse habitualmente? —insistió el otro.

—Sí, sí —respondió Fielding distraídamente, pensando en media docena de cosas al mismo tiempo.

—Eso está bien, porque en ese caso vio usted el Estanque de la Daga.

Y Godbole procedió a relatar una leyenda que podría haber sido aceptable si la hubiera contado mientras tomaban juntos el té, dos semanas

antes. La historia hacía referencia a un rajá hindú que había asesinado al hijo de su propia hermana, y después no había podido soltar la daga instrumento del delito, hasta que, con el paso de los años, atravesó las Colinas de Marabar, donde tuvo sed y quiso beber, pero vio una vaca también sedienta y ordenó que, primero, le ofrecieran agua a ella, y, nada más hacerlo, «la daga cayó de su mano, y para conmemorar el milagro el rajá construyó el estanque». Las conversaciones del profesor Godbole culminaban frecuentemente en una vaca. Fielding, muy abatido, se limitó a guardar silencio.

Más avanzada la tarde, el Director del Instituto consiguió una autorización y pudo ver a Aziz, pero el sufrimiento le había vuelto inaccesible. «Usted me abandonó», fue su única observación inteligible. Fielding salió de la cárcel para ir a escribir la carta a Miss Quested. Aunque la carta llegara a sus manos, no serviría de nada, y lo más probable era que los McBryde se apoderaran de ella. Miss Quested le desconcertaba. Era una chica sin imaginación, muy razonable y llena de voluntad: la última persona de Chandrapore que acusaría injustamente a un indio.

Capítulo vigésimo

Aunque Miss Quested no se había hecho popular entre los ingleses, el episodio de Marabar logró que salieran a relucir los aspectos más positivos de la comunidad británica. Durante varias horas brotaron a raudales emociones muy nobles, que las mujeres experimentaron incluso con más intensidad que los hombres, aunque quizá por menos tiempo. «¿Qué podemos hacer por nuestra hermana?», pensaban Mrs. Callendar y Mrs. Leslev mientras se dirigían bajo un calor sofocante a interesarse por la salud de Miss Quested. Mrs. Turton era la única visitante a quien se permitía la entrada en la habitación de la enferma. Cuando salió de allí lo hizo ennoblecida por un dolor totalmente altruista.

—Es como si se tratara de mi propia hija.

Fueron sus palabras; y luego, al recordar su comentario de que Miss Quested «no era *pukka»* y lo mal que le había parecido su compromiso matrimonial con el joven Heaslop, se echó a llorar.

Nadie había visto llorar a la esposa del Administrador. Mrs. Turton era perfectamente capaz de derramar lágrimas, pero siempre las reservaba para alguna ocasión adecuada; y ahora esa ocasión había llegado. ¡Áh! ¿Por qué no habían sido todos más amables y más pacientes con aquella forastera, dándole no sólo hospitalidad, sino también su afecto? Esa parte más tierna del corazón, que raras veces se usa, la emplearon por algún tiempo

estimulados por el remordimiento. Si todo ha pasado (como el Mayor Callendar daba a entender), de acuerdo, ha pasado todo, y no se puede hacer nada, pero les seguía correspondiendo cierta responsabilidad en el terrible infortunio de Miss Quested, responsabilidad que no eran capaces de definir. Tenían que haber logrado convertirla en uno de ellos, aunque la muchacha no lo fuera en un principio, pero ahora ya nunca lo podrían hacer, porque no estaba en condiciones de aceptar su invitación.

—¿Por qué no pensamos más en los que nos rodean? —suspiró Miss Derek, tan amiga del placer.

Este pesar sólo duró unas cuantas horas en su forma más pura. Antes efe la puesta del sol, otras consideraciones empezaron a adulterarlo, y el sentimiento de culpabilidad (tan extrañamente unido a nuestro primer contacto con cualquier sufrimiento) fue perdiendo fuerza.

Los funcionarios civiles acudieron al Club con premeditada calma; los caballos al trote corto, como los propietarios rurales se pasean en Inglaterra entre setos florecidos, porque los nativos no debían sospechar la agitación que les dominaba. Consumieron sus bebidas habituales, pero todo sabía distinto, y luego contemplaron la empalizada de cactos que apuñalaba la purpúrea garganta del cielo, dándose cuenta de que se hallaban a miles de millas de cualquier paisaje que fueran capaces de entender. El Club estaba más lleno que de costumbre, y algunos padres habían hecho entrar a sus hijos en las habitaciones reservadas para los adultos, lo que le daba el aire de la Residencia de Lucknow[7]. Una madre joven —estúpida pero extraordinariamente hermosa— estaba sentada en un sofá en la sala de fumadores con su bebé en brazos. Su marido se hallaba de viaje por el distrito y ella no se atrevía a volver a su bungalow por temor «a que atacaran los nativos». Era la mujer de un funcionario poco importante del ferrocarril a la que de ordinario se prodigaban los desaires; pero aquella noche, con su figura abundante y su espesa cabellera de color maíz maduro, había pasado a simbolizar todo aquello por lo que merecía la pena luchar y morir; un símbolo quizá más permanente que la pobre Adela.

—No se preocupe, Mrs. Blakiston, son sólo los tambores de *muharram* —le decían los hombres.

—Entonces es que ya han empezado —gemía ella, estrechando al niño y deseando más bien que no eructara y babeara en un momento como aquel.

—No, por supuesto que no; y de todas formas no vienen hacia el Club.

—Ni tampoco van hacia el bungalow del *Burra sahib*, que es donde usted y su niño van a dormir esta noche, querida —añadió Mrs. Turton, erguida a su lado como Palas Atenea, y decidida a no ser tan esnob en el futuro.

El Administrador dio unas palmadas para conseguir silencio. Estaba mucho más tranquilo que durante su enfrentamiento con Fielding. De hecho, siempre estaba más tranquilo cuando se dirigía a varias personas que en un *téte-a-tete*.

—Quiero dirigirme especialmente a las señoras —dijo—. No existe el menor motivo de alarma. No pierdan la serenidad. Salgan sólo cuando sea absolutamente necesario, no bajen a la ciudad y no hablen delante de los criados. Eso es todo.

—Harry, ¿hay alguna noticia de la ciudad? —preguntó su mujer, en pie a cierta distancia de Mr. Turton, y utilizando también una voz que reflejaba su interés por la seguridad pública. El resto de los presentes guardó silencio durante el augusto coloquio.

—Absoluta normalidad.

—Ésa era también mi impresión. Esos tambores son sólo los de *muharram*, por supuesto.

—Únicamente la preparación para la fiesta; la procesión no tendrá lugar hasta la semana que viene.

—Sí, claro; el lunes próximo.

—Mr. McBryde está allí abajo, disfrazado de santón —dijo Mrs. Callendar.

—Ése es exactamente el tipo de observación que se debe evitar —hizo anotar el Administrador señalándola—. Mrs. Callendar, haga el favor de tener más cuidado en estos tiempos que corren.

—Bueno, yo…

No estaba ofendida; la severidad de Mr. Turton le hacía sentirse segura.

—¿Alguna pregunta más? Preguntas necesarias.

—¿Qué ha sido del…? ¿Dónde está…? —tembló la voz de Mrs. Lesley.

—En la cárcel. Le ha sido denegada la fianza.

Fielding habló a continuación. Quería saber si había un boletín oficial sobre la salud de Miss Quested, y si las noticias sobre su gravedad eran dignas de crédito. Su pregunta produjo mal efecto, en parte por haber pronunciado el nombre de la víctima; tanto de ella como de Aziz sólo se hablaba mediante una perífrasis.

—Espero que Callendar esté pronto en condiciones de hacemos saber cómo marchan las cosas.

—En cualquier caso, no me parece que esa última pregunta pueda calificarse de necesaria —dijo Mrs. Turton.

—¿Serán tan amables las señoras de abandonar ahora el salón de fumadores? —exclamó el Administrador, dando de nuevo unas palmadas— Y recuerden lo que he dicho. Contamos con ustedes para que nos ayuden a superar un momento difícil, y pueden ayudarnos comportándose como si todo fuera normal. No es otra cosa lo que les pido. ¿Puedo confiar en ustedes?

—Sí, naturalmente, ¡claro que sí! —respondieron unánimemente las señoras, con rostros ansiosos y demacrados.

Abandonaron la sala apaciguadas, pero llenas de exaltación, con Mrs. Blakiston en el centro como una llama sagrada. Las sencillas palabras de Mr. Turton les habían recordado que eran una avanzad a del Imperio. Junto a su compasivo afecto por Adela, surgió otro sentimiento que terminaría a la larga por estrangularlo. Sus primeras manifestaciones fueron prosaicas y de poca importancia. Mrs. Turton, jugando al bridge, hizo sus chistes habituales, que nada tenían de delicados, y Mrs. Lesley empezó a tejer una bufanda.

Cuando el salón de fumadores quedó despejado, el Administrador se sentó en el borde de una mesa, con lo que podía dominar toda la habitación sin que la reunión adquiriera un ambiente demasiado protocolario. Su mente se debatía entre impulsos contradictorios. Quería vengar a Miss Quested y castigar a Fielding, sin dejar por ello de mostrarse escrupulosamente justo. Sentía deseos de azotar a todos los nativos que veía, pero sin hacer nada que

pudiera provocar un motín o exigir una intervención armada. El temor a tener que llamar a las tropas era en él muy intenso, los soldados enderezan una cosa, pero dejan otras doce torcidas, y les encanta humillar a la Administración civil. Aquella noche había accidentalmente un militar en la habitación, oficial de un regimiento gurkha; estaba un poco borracho y consideraba providencial su presencia en Chanarapóre. El Administrador suspiró. No parecía haber otra salida que el viejo y gastado camino de la avenencia y la moderación. Echaba de menos los días de antaño, cuando un inglés podía encontrar satisfacción para su honor sin que nadie después le hiciese preguntas. El pobre Heaslop había dado un paso en aquel sentido negándose a conceder la libertad bajo fianza, pero el Administrador no conseguía convencerse de que el pobre Heaslop hubiese obrado prudentemente. No sólo iban a enfadarse el Nabab Bahadur y los demás, sino que había que contar con la vigilancia del Gobierno mismo de la India y, detrás de él, esa asamblea de locos y cobardes, el Parlamento británico. Constantemente tenía que recordarse a sí mismo que, a los ojos de la ley, Aziz no era aún culpable, y el esfuerzo le fatigaba.

Los otros, menos abrumados por la responsabilidad, podían comportarse de manera más natural. Habían empezado hablando de «mujeres y niños», esa frase que exime al varón de obrar con cordura después de repetirla unas cuantas veces. Todos sentían que se hallaban en peligro las cosas que más querían, exigían venganza y estaban llenos de un agradable ardor en el que los fríos y casi desconocidos rasgos de Miss Quested se desvanecían para ser reemplazados por tocio lo que había de más cálido y más grato en sus vidas privadas. «Pero se trata de las mujeres y de los niños», repetían, el Administrador sabía que tenía que hacer algo para evitar que se emborracharan con sus propias palabras, pero le faltaba el valor. «Habría que obligarles a entregar rehenes», etc. Muchos de los niños y mujeres en cuestión saldrían para su residencia de verano al cabo de unos días, y alguien sugirió embarcarlos inmediatamente en un tren especial.

—Excelente sugerencia —exclamó el oficial—. El ejército tendrá que intervenir antes o después. —En su mente un tren especial iba indisolublemente ligado a la idea de tropas—. Esto no hubiera sucedido

nunca si esa Colina de Barabas estuviera bajo control militar. Bastaba con colocar un puñado de gurkhas a la entrada de la cueva.

—Mrs. Blakiston estaba diciendo que ojala hubiese aquí unos cuantos soldados ingleses —señaló alguien.

—Los ingleses no sirven —exclamó el oficial, sumido momentáneamente en un conflicto de lealtades—. En este país lo que hacen falta son tropas indígenas. Me quedo con el nativo al que le van los deportes; denme gurkhas, denme rajputas, denme jatíes, o panjabíes, o sikhs, o marathas, o bhíls, o arridis y pathans; y en realidad, si vamos a eso, no me importa que me den la escoria de los bazares. Bien dirigidos, claro está. Iría con ellos a cualquier sitio… El Administrador asintió cortésmente y dijo a los suyos: —No vayan por ahí con armas. Quiero que todo siga exactamente como siempre, hasta que haya motivos para hacer otra cosa. Manden a las mujeres a la montaña, pero háganlo tranquilamente, y, por el amor de Dios, que no se hable más de trenes especiales. Olvídense de lo que piensen o de cómo sientan. Es posible que también yo tenga mis sentimientos. Un indio ha intentado…, se le acusa de haber intentado la comisión de un delito —Mr. Turton se golpeó varias veces la frente con una uña, y todos se dieron cuenta de que los sentimientos del Administrador eran tan intensos como los suyos, creció el afecto hacia él y decidieron no crearle nuevas dificultades—. Hay que actuar de acuerdo con los datos de que disponemos hasta que suceda algo nuevo —concluyó—. Suponer que todos los indios son ángeles.

—Tiene usted razón, eso es lo que haremos… Ángeles… Exactamente… —murmuraron los otros.

—Lo mismo que yo dije —exclamó el oficial—. Un nativo se comporta bien si se está a solas con él. ¡Lesley! ¡Lesley! Usted se acuerda de uno con el que me entretuve un rato en el Maidan el mes pasado. Era un buen tipo. Cualquier nativo que juega al polo no puede ser malo del todo. Pero a las clases educadas hay que aplastarlas, y esta vez sé muy bien de lo que estoy hablando.

Se abrió la puerta del salón de fumadores, dejando pasar un rumor de voces femeninas.

—La enferma está mejor —exclamó Mrs. Turton, y de ambas secciones de la comunidad se alzó un suspiro de alegría y de alivio.

El Cirujano-Jefe, que había traído las buenas noticias, entró a continuación. Su rostro, pálido y abotagado tenía una expresión de mal humor. Recorrió con la vista a los presentes, y al descubrir a Fielding recostado en un sofá dijo: —¡Hummm!

Todos empezaron a pedirle que diera más detalles.

—En este país nadie está fuera de peligro mientras tenga fiebre —fue su respuesta.

Parecía molestarle que su paciente se recuperara, y nadie que conociera al viejo Mayor y sus métodos podía sorprenderse de ello.

—Siéntese, Callendar; cuéntenoslo todo.

—Me llevaría un buen rato hacerlo.

—¿Qué tal está la muchacha?

—Tiene fiebre.

—Mi mujer ha oído que estaba empeorando.

—Podría ser. No garantizo nada. Preferiría que no se me acosara a preguntas, Lesley.

—Discúlpenos.

—Heaslop viene detrás de mí.

Al nombre de Ronny una expresión sublime reapareció en todos los rostros. Miss Quested no era más que una víctima; el joven Heaslop, en cambio, encarnaba al mártir; era el destinatario de todo el mal que dirigía contra ellos el país al que trataban de servir; iba cargado con la cruz del *sabib*. Y los otros se impacientaban al no poder nacer nada; se sentían terriblemente cobardes por tener que esperar, cómodamente sentados, a que la ley siguiera su curso.

—Ojalá no hubiese dado permiso a mi asistente. Tendría que haberme cortado la lengua antes. Sentir que soy responsable, eso es lo que más me afecta. Decir que no y ceder luego bajo presión. Eso es lo que hice, hijos míos, eso es lo que hice.

Fielding se sacó la pipa de la boca y la contempló con aire pensativo. Creyéndole asustado, el otro continuó:

—Tenía entendido que un inglés iba a formar parte de la expedición. Por eso cedí.

—Nadie le culpa a usted, mi querido Callendar —dijo el Administrador, mirando al suelo—. Todos somos responsables, por cuanto deberíamos haber comprendido que la expedición no contaba con las suficientes garantías. Yo estaba informado, personalmente; las dos señoras fueron a la estación en nuestro coche esta mañana. En ese sentido estamos todos implicados, pero a usted personalmente no le corresponde ni un átomo de culpabilidad.

—No es así como yo lo siento, aunque me gustaría. La responsabilidad es una cosa terrible, y detesto al hombre que la rehúye. Sus ojos estaban fijos en Fielding.

Quienes sabían que el Director del Instituto se había comprometido a ir en la excursión y que luego había perdido el tren de madrugada le compadecían; era lo que cabe esperar cuando uno se mezcla con los nativos; siempre acaba produciéndose algún ultraje. El Administrador, que estaba mejor informado, guardó silencio, porque en su calidad de funcionario aún conservaba la esperanza de que Fielding volviera al redil. La conversación volvió de nuevo a las mujeres y a los niños, y, aprovechándose de ella, el Mayor Callendar hizo un aparte con el militar y le instigó para que provocara a Fielding. Fingiéndose más borracho de lo que estaba en realidad, empezó a hacer observaciones semiofensivas.

—¿Han oído lo del criado de Miss Quested? —intervino el Mayor, colaborando en el ataque.

—No, ¿qué hay de él?

—Anoche Heaslop advirtió al criado de Miss Quested que tuviera buen cuidado de no perderla nunca de vista. El detenido lo supo y se las arregló para dejarlo atrás. Lo sobornó. Heaslop acaba de enterarse de toda la historia, con nombres y cantidades: un alcahuete bien conocido de esas gentes le dio el dinero, un tal Mohammed Latif. Eso en cuanto al criado. Pero ¿y el inglés, nuestro amigo aquí presente? ¿Cómo consiguió librarse de él? También con dinero.

Fielding se puso en pie, apoyado por murmullos y exclamaciones, porque nadie ponía aún en duda su integridad.

—Se me ha interpretado mal; pido disculpas —dijo el Mayor con tono ofensivo—. No he querido decir que sobornaran a Mr. Fielding.

—Entonces, ¿qué es lo que quiere usted decir?

—Pagaron al otro indio, Godbole, para que le hiciera llegar a usted tarde. Estaba diciendo sus oraciones. ¡Ya conozco yo esas oraciones!

—Eso es ridículo…

Fielding volvió a sentarse, temblando de rabia; una persona tras otra, todos iban siendo arrastrados por el fango.

Después del primer golpe de efecto, el Mayor empezó a preparar el segundo:

—Heaslop también se enteró de algo por su madre. Aziz pagó a una turba de nativos para que la asfixiaran. Eso acabó con ella, o habría estado a punto de hacerlo si no llega a escapar. Bien planeado, ¿no es cierto? Muy hábil. Luego mi asistente podía seguir ya solo con la muchacha. Él, ella y un guía, suministrado por el mismo Mohammed Latif. Ahora el guía no aparece por ningún sitio. Maravilloso —su voz se transformó en un rugido —. No es momento de quedarse sentados. Es hora de pasar a la acción. Hay que llamar a las tropas y limpiar los bazares[8].

Nunca se daba importancia a las explosiones de cólera del Mayor, pero en aquella ocasión logró que todos se sintieran incómodos. El delito era todavía peor de lo que habían imaginado, llegando a unas incalificables cotas de cinismo que no habían vuelto a alcanzarse desde 1857. Fielding olvidó su propia indignación, preocupado por el pobre Godbole, y se quedó pensativo; el mal se propagaba en todas direcciones, y parecía tener una existencia propia, ajena a cualquier cosa que las personas aisladas pudieran hacer o decir, y el Director del Instituto entendió mejor por qué Aziz y Hamidullah se habían sentido inclinados a tumbarse y dejarse morir. Su adversario vio que estaba teniendo problemas y se atrevió a decir;

—Supongo que nada de lo que se hable dentro del club saldrá fuera, ¿no es cierto? —guiñándole un ojo a Lesley mientras tanto.

—¿Por qué tendría que salir? —respondió Lesley.

—No, por nada. Pero he oído un rumor de que cierto miembro del club, aquí presente, ha visitado esta tarde al detenido. No es posible nadar y guardar la ropa al mismo tiempo, por lo menos en este país.

—¿Es que hay alguien aquí que quiera hacerlo?

Fielding estaba decidido a no dejarse arrastrar de nuevo. Tenía algo que decir, pero lo haría cuando él lo considerara oportuno. El ataque no llegó a prosperar al faltarle el apoyo del Administrador. Por unos instantes Fielding dejó de ser el centro de la atención. Luego volvió a oírse el murmullo de las mujeres en la habitación vecina. Ronny había abierto la puerta.

El joven Heaslop parecía exhausto y tenía una expresión trágica, pero también resultaba más sumiso que de ordinario. Siempre había mostrado deferencia hacia sus superiores, pero ahora le salía directamente del corazón. Parecía suplicar su protección ante el insulto de que había sido objeto, y ellos, en un instintivo gesto de homenaje, se pusieron en pie. Pero en el Oriente todo acto humano tiene un tinte oficial, y al mismo tiempo que se honraba a Heaslop, se condenaba a Aziz y a la India. Fielding, dándose cuenta de esto, siguió sentado. Era un gesto descortés, incluso grosero, y quizá también tácticamente equivocado, pero el Director del Instituto comprendió que ya llevaba suficiente tiempo mostrándose pasivo, y que si no manifestaba su disconformidad podía verse arrastrado hacia donde no quería en contra de su voluntad. Ronny, que no le había visto, dijo con voz ronca:

—Por favor, siéntense todos, tengan la bondad; sólo quiero enterarme de las decisiones que se hayan tomado.

—Heaslop, les he explicado que estoy en contra de cualquier manifestación de fuerza —dijo el Administrador, como disculpándose—. No sé si estará usted de acuerdo conmigo, pero la situación en la que me encuentro me obliga a ello. Las cosas serán distintas cuando se consiga el veredicto.

—Sin duda usted lo sabe mejor que yo; carezco de experiencia y no puedo decir nada.

—¿Qué tal está su madre, muchacho?

—Mejor, muchas gracias. Quisiera que todos volvieran a sentarse.

—Hay alguno que no se ha llegado a levantar —dijo el joven oficial.

—Y el Mayor nos trae excelentes noticias de Miss Quested —continuó Turton.

—Así es, así es; estoy satisfecho.

—Anteriormente se mostró usted bastante pesimista, ¿no es cierto, Mayor? Fue ésa la razón de que denegara la libertad bajo fianza.

Callendar rió con amistosa familiaridad y dijo: —Heaslop, Heaslop, la próxima vez que le pidan esa libertad bajo fianza, llame por teléfono al viejo doctor antes de concederla; tiene los hombros muy anchos, y, hablando confidencialmente, no se tome demasiado en serio su opinión. Es un charlatán estúpido, de eso no cabe la menor duda, pero siempre hará lo que pueda para que siga en chirona el… —Se detuvo con fingida cortesía —. No me daba cuenta de que tiene aquí a uno de sus amigos.

—Levántese, cerdo —exclamó el oficial.

—Mr. Fielding, ¿qué le ha impedido ponerse en pie? —dijo el Administrador, entrando finalmente en la contienda.

Era el ataque que el Director del Instituto había estado esperando y al que tenía que responder.

—¿Se me permite hacer una declaración?

—Claro que sí.

Con su madurez e independencia, libre de los fervores del nacionalismo o de la juventud, Fielding hizo lo que era para él, comparativamente, una cosa bastante fácil. Poniéndose en pie, dijo: —Creo que el doctor Aziz es inocente.

—Tiene usted derecho a mantener esa opinión si así lo desea, pero dígame, ¿es esa una razón para que insulte a Mr. Heaslop?

—¿Puedo terminar mi declaración?

—Ciertamente.

—Voy a esperar a la sentencia del tribunal. Si Aziz es culpable, presentaré mi dimisión y abandonaré la India. En cuanto al club, renuncio a mi calidad de socio ahora mismo.

—¡Oigan, oigan! —dijeron algunas voces no completamente hostiles, porque les parecía bien que Fielding hablase claro.

—No ha contestado usted a mi pregunta. ¿Por qué no se ha levantado al entrar Mr. Heaslop?

—Con el debido respeto debo decir, señor, que no estoy aquí para contestar preguntas, sino para hacer una declaración personal, y ya he terminado.

—¿Puedo preguntarle si se ha hecho usted cargo de este distrito? Fielding se dirigió hacia la puerta.

—Un momento, Mr. Fielding. Haga el favor de no marcharse todavía. Antes de abandonar el club, del que hace usted muy bien en renunciar a ser socio, tendrá que manifestar su desaprobación por el delito cometido y presentar sus disculpas a Mr. Heaslop.

—¿Me habla usted oficialmente?

El Administrador, que nunca hablaba de otra manera, se enojó tanto que perdió los estribos.

—Salga de esta habitación inmediatamente —gritó—. Lamento profundamente haberme degradado yendo a buscarle a la estación. Se ha hundido usted al nivel de sus aliados; es usted un hombre débil, y el problema con usted es que…

—Quisiera abandonar la habitación, pero no puedo hacerlo mientras me lo impida este caballero —dijo Fielding con entonación jovial.

El joven oficial se había cruzado en su camino.

—Dejen que se vaya —dijo Ronny, casi con lágrimas en los ojos. Era la única súplica que podía salvar la situación. Cualquier cosa que Heaslop deseara tenía que hacerse. Se produjo un pequeño forcejeo en la puerta, que Fielding atravesó un poco más de prisa de lo ordinario, yendo a parar a la habitación donde las señoras jugaban a las cartas. «Supongamos que me hubiese caído al suelo o llegado a enfadarme», pensó. Estaba un poco enfadado, por supuesto. Sus compañeros nunca le habían tratado de manera violenta, llamándole antes débil; Heaslop, además, había amontonado carbones ardiendo sobre su cabeza. Ojalá no hubiese utilizado al pobre Ronny para buscar pelea, sobre todo habiendo como había otros motivos mucho mejores para hacerlo.

De todas formas, ya estaba hecho, aunque fuera chapuceramente, y para calmarse y recobrar el equilibrio mental, Fielding salió un momento a la galería superior, donde lo primero que apareció ante sus ojos fueron las Colinas de Marabar. A aquella distancia y a aquella hora se transfiguraban; eran Monsalvat[9], el Valhala[10], las torres de una catedral, pobladas de santos y de héroes y cubiertas de flores. ¿Qué ser impío se ocultaba en ellas y tenía que ser detectado cuanto antes, gracias a los esfuerzos de la justicia? ¿Quién era el guía? ¿Seguirían aún sin encontrarlo? ¿Qué era el «eco» del que Miss Quested se quejaba? Fielding lo ignoraba aún, pero pronto llegaría a saberlo. La información es una gran cosa y terminaría por imponerse. La luz se estaba extinguiendo, y mientras contemplaba las colinas, parecieron avanzar hacia él llenas de gracia, como un cortejo de reinas, y su encanto se fundió con el del cielo. Al llegar la oscuridad se hallaban ya en todas partes: descendió la refrescante bendición de la noche, brillaron las estrellas y el universo entero fue una colina. Maravilloso, exquisito momento que, sin embargo, pasó junto al inglés hurtando el rostro y con la rapidez del viento. Fielding no experimentó nada personalmente; era como si alguien le hubiese dicho que existía tal momento y se viera obligado a creerlo. Repentinamente, se sintió descontento y lleno de dudas, y se preguntó si real y verdaderamente tenía éxito como ser humano. Después de cuarenta años de experiencia, había aprendido a administrar su vida y a obtener de ella el mejor rendimiento posible de acuerdo con las directrices europeas más avanzadas; había desarrollado su personalidad, definido sus limitaciones, controlado sus pasiones… y lo había logrado todo sin hacerse pedante ni mundano. Un resultado muy estimable; pero, mientras la luz se esfumaba, Fielding sintió que durante todo aquel tiempo debería haber estado luchando por algo distinto: no sabía qué, ni lo sabría nunca, ni era posible llegar a saberlo, y ésa era la razón de su tristeza.

Capítulo vigésimo primero

Fielding, después de desechar sus remordimientos por el asunto que le preocupaba en aquellos momentos, empleó la última parte del día en visitar a sus nuevos aliados. Estaba contento de haber roto con el Club, porque sin duda hubiese recogido allí algún que otro chisme que podría contar después a sus amigos, y prefería que no existiese tal posibilidad. Echaría de menos el billar, algún partido de tenis muy de tarde en tarde y las bromas con McBryde; pero eso era todo, porque Fielding viajaba ligero de equipaje, como había explicado a Aziz durante su visita. A la entrada de los bazares, un tigre asustó a su caballo: un muchacho disfrazado de tigre, el cuerpo a rayas marrones y amarillas y el rostro cubierto por una máscara. Se estaban preparando las festividades de *muharram*. Eran muchos los tambores que sonaban por la ciudad, pero no daban una impresión de mal humor. Se le invitó a inspeccionar una pequeña *tazia*, endeble y frágil estructura, más parecida a un miriñaque que a la tumba del nieto del Profeta, asesinado en Kerbela. Niños llenos de entusiasmo pegaban papeles de colores sobre las varillas del armazón. Fielding pasó el resto de la velada con el Nabab Bahadur, Hamidullah, Manmoud Ali y otros miembros de la coalición. Ya estaba en marcha la campaña en favor de Aziz. Se había enviado un telegrama al famoso Amritrao, y recibido su respuesta afirmativa. Iba a

renovarse la petición de libertad bajo fianza: no podrían seguir denegándola ahora que Miss Quested se hallaba fuera de peligro.

La reunión era un asunto serio y razonable, deslucido por la presencia de un grupo de músicos itinerantes, a quienes se había permitido tocar dentro del recinto donde se celebraba. Cada uno empuñaba un cántaro de barro de considerables dimensiones, con guijarros en su interior, que agitaban arriba y abajo, marcando el ritmo de una triste salmodia. Aturdido por el ruido, Fielding propuso que se les despidiera, pero el Nabab Bahadur se opuso; dijo que unos músicos que habían recorrido tantas millas podían traer buena suerte.

Ya avanzada la noche, el Director del Instituto sintió el deseo de contarle al profesor Godbole el error táctico y moral que había cometido mostrándose descortés con Heaslop, para oír los comentarios del hindú. Pero el anciano se había acostado ya, y un día o dos después se escabullo camino de su nuevo trabajo sin que nadie le molestara; el profesor Godbole siempre había tenido una gran habilidad para desaparecer en el momento oportuno.

Capítulo vigésimo segundo

Adela permaneció varios días en cama en el bungalow de los McBryde. Tenía un principio de insolación y hubo, además, que extraerle cientos de pinchos de cacto. Hora tras hora Miss Derek y Mrs. McBryde la estuvieron examinando con lupa, descubriendo a cada momento nuevas colonias, diminutos filamentos que podían quebrarse y ser arrastrados por la corriente sanguínea si no se les arrancaba a tiempo. Miss Quested permanecía pasiva entre sus dedos, que iban dando forma a la conmoción iniciada en la cueva. Anteriormente no le había importado mucho si la tocaban o no; sus sentidos se mostraban anormalmente inertes, y el único contacto que preveía era el de la mente. Pero ahora todo se había trasladado a la superficie de su cuerpo, que empezaba a vengarse, respondiendo de manera enfermiza. Las personas resultaban muy parecidas entre sí, con la única diferencia de que algunas se acercaban y otras se mantenían distantes. «En el espacio las cosas se tocan, en el tiempo se separan», se repetía Adela mientras le extraían los pinchos: su cerebro estaba tan debilitado que no era capaz de decidir si aquella frase era un postulado filosófico o un juego de palabras.

Todos eran muy amables con ella, incluso demasiado amables; los hombres demasiado respetuosos y las mujeres demasiado compasivas; mientras que Mrs. Moore, la única visitante que anhelaba, se mantenía a distancia. Nadie entendía su problema, ni sabía por qué oscilaba entre

actitudes llenas de sentido común y otras que bordeaban el histerismo. A veces empezaban a hablar como si no hubiera sucedido nada especial.

—Entré en aquella cueva detestable —decía una voz neutra—, y recuerdo haber arañado la pared con una uña, para que se produjera el eco habitual, y luego, como iba diciendo, apareció aquella sombra, o algo semejante a una sombra, en la entrada del túnel, impidiéndome el paso. Me pareció un siglo, pero supongo que todo ello no debió de durar en realidad más allá de treinta segundos. Le golpeé con los prismáticos, él me zarandeó tirando de la correa, y al romperse me escapé; eso es todo. No llegó a tocarme ni una sola vez. Todo ello parece una cosa muy estúpida. —Luego los ojos se le llenaban de lágrimas—. Estoy algo trastornada, como es lógico, pero se me pasará.

Después se derrumbaba por completo, y las mujeres se daban cuenta de que era una de ellas y lloraban también, y en la habitación vecina los nombres murmuraban: «¡Cielo santo, cielo santo!» Nadie comprendía que a Adela las lágrimas le parecían una cosa indigna, una indignidad más sutil que las soportadas en las Colinas de Marabar, un mentís a su actitud progresista y a la sinceridad, que era una característica natural de su inteligencia. Adela estaba siempre tratando de «analizar de forma racional el incidente», recordándose a sí misma todo el tiempo que nadie había salido perjudicado. Estaba «la conmoción», pero ¿qué es eso? Durante un rato su propia lógica lograba convencerla, luego oía de nuevo el eco, lloraba, se declaraba indigna de Ronny y deseaba que cayera sobre su asaltante todo el rigor de la justicia. Después de uno de aquellos ataques, anhelaba bajar a los bazares y pedir perdón a todas las personas que encontrase, porque, vagamente, sentía que estaba dejando el mundo peor de como lo había encontrado, y que era ella la autora del delito, hasta que el entendimiento, despertando de nuevo, le hacía ver que se equivocaba en aquel punto, obligándola a reanudar el mismo estéril recorrido.

¡Si hubiera podido ver a Mrs. Moore! Pero la anciana señora tampoco se encontraba bien y no tenía ganas de salir, según le explicó Ronny. Y el resultado era que el eco florecía, retumbando como si fuera un nervio que formara parte de su facultad auditiva, y el ruido de la cueva, tan poco

importante intelectualmente, se prolongaba por toda la superficie de su vida. Adela había arañado la bruñida pared —sin motivo alguno— y antes de que el comentario se extinguiera, él la había seguido, y el momento culminante era la caída de los prismáticos. El sonido la había seguido a borbotones mientras escapaba, y todavía continuaba, como un río que inunda gradualmente el valle que lo alberga. Sólo Mrs. Moore podía hacerlo volver a su fuente y sellar de nuevo el depósito roto. El mal estaba suelto…, lo oía incluso entrar en las vidas de otros… Y Adela pasó días en este clima de pesadumbre y depresión. Sus amigos conseguían no desalentarse exigiendo holocaustos de nativos, pero Miss Quested estaba demasiado preocupada y demasiado débil para poder hacerlo.

Cuando terminaron de quitarle los pinchos de los cactos y su temperatura volvió a la normalidad, Ronny fue a buscarla para llevársela a su casa. El estaba agotado por la indignación y el sufrimiento, y ella hubiese querido consolarle; pero la intimidad entre los dos parecía ser una caricatura de sí misma, y cuanto más hablaban, más desdichados y cohibidos se sentían. Ocuparse de cosas prácticas resultaba menos penoso, y Ronny y McBryde le contaron a Adela una o dos cosas que le habían ocultado durante la crisis obedeciendo las órdenes del médico. La muchacha se enteró en aquel momento de los disturbios durante *muharram*, que casi habían degenerado en un motín. El último día de las festividades la gran procesión abandonó su ruta oficial y trató de entrar en la zona residencial inglesa, llegando a cortar un hilo telefónico porque impedía el avance de una de las más voluminosas torres de papel. McBryde y su policía habían conseguido enderezar las cosas: una labor muy meritoria. Después tocaron otro tema muy penoso: el juicio. Miss Quested tendría que asistir, reconocer al procesado y someterse al interrogatorio de un abogado indio.

—¿Podrá estar conmigo Mrs. Moore? —fue todo lo que preguntó.

—Claro que sí, y yo también estaré allí —replicó Ronny—. No seré yo quien presida; la defensa se ha opuesto alegando incompatibilidad por razones personales. El juicio va a ser en Chandrapore; al principio creíamos que lo trasladarían a otro lugar.

—Quizá Miss Quested no se dé cuenta de lo que todo eso quiere decir —añadió McBryde con voz triste—. Será Das quien presida. Das era el ayudante de Ronny, hermano de Mrs. Bhattacharya, cuyo coche no había ido a recogerlas un mes antes, y hombre cortés e inteligente que, con las pruebas delante, sólo podría llegar a una conclusión; pero el hecho de que tuviera jurisdicción sobre una muchacha inglesa había llenado de indignación a la colonia de funcionarios, y algunas de las señoras habían enviado un telegrama de protesta a Lady Mellanby, la esposa del Vicegobernador.

—Imagino que tengo que comparecer delante de alguien.

—Así…, así es como hay que enfocarlo. Tiene usted el valor suficiente para hacerlo, Miss Quested.

McBryde estaba muy disconforme e irritado con la manera en que iba a desarrollarse el juicio y aseguraba que todo aquello eran «los frutos de la democracia». En otros tiempos una inglesa no hubiera tenido que comparecer, ni indio alguno se hubiera atrevido a hablar en público de sus asuntos privados; la dama habría hecho su declaración y el juicio habría seguido su curso. McBryde pidió disculpas a Adela por la situación en que se encontraba el país, con el resultado de que la muchacha dejara escapar de improviso otro pequeño raudal de lágrimas. Ronny estuvo paseando por la habitación sintiéndose muy desgraciado mientras ella lloraba, pisando las flores que tan inevitablemente cubrían la alfombra de Cachemira o tamborileando con los dedos sobre las vasijas de cobre de Benarés.

—Cada día me pasa menos; pronto estaré completamente bien —dijo Adela sonándose la nariz y sintiéndose terriblemente descontenta consigo misma—. Lo que necesito es algo que hacer. Esa es la razón de que siga llorando de esta manera tan ridícula.

—No tiene nada de ridículo; todos pensamos que es usted maravillosa —dijo el policía con absoluta sinceridad—. Lo único que nos molesta es no poder ayudarla más. Que se haya quedado usted aquí, en un momento como éste, es el mayor honor que esta casa… —También él se hallaba dominado por la emoción—. Por cierto, llegó una carta para usted cuando estaca enferma —continuó—. Y tengo que hacerle una extraña confesión: la abrí.

¿Me perdonará usted por ello? Las circunstancias son algo peculiares. La carta es de Fielding.

—Para que tendría que escribirme?

—Ha sucedido una cosa lamentable. Se ha convertido en testigo de la defensa.

—Está chiflado, completamente chiflado —dijo Ronny, quitándole importancia.

—Ésa es una manera muy caritativa de decirlo, porque un hombre puede estar loco y seguir siendo un caballero. Será mejor informar a Miss Quested de su comportamiento con usted. Si usted no se lo dice alguien lo hará. McBryde mismo procedió a contárselo. Ahora Fielding es el principal apoyo de la defensa, no hace falta añadirlo. Es el único inglés honesto entre una horda de tiranos. Recibe delegaciones del bazar, y todos mascan nuez de betel y se untan unos a otros las manos con perfume. No es fácil penetrar en la mente de un hombre semejante. Sus alumnos están de huelga: el entusiasmo que sienten por él les impide estudiar. Si no fuera por Fielding nunca se hubieran producido los disturbios durante *milbarram*. Ha causado un grave daño a toda la comunidad. La carta estuvo ahí un día o dos, esperando a que usted se recuperara; luego la situación empeoró tanto que decidí abrirla por si podía sernos de alguna utilidad.

—¿Ha servido de algo? —preguntó Adela débilmente.

—Absolutamente de nada. Mr. Fielding tan sólo tiene la impertinencia de sugerir que se ha equivocado usted.

—¡Ojalá fuera así! —Miss Quested ojeó la carta, que estaba redactada de manera cuidadosa y protocolaria—. El doctor Aziz es inocente —leyó Adela. Luego la voz volvió a temblarle de nuevo—. Pero piensa en su comportamiento contigo, Ronny. ¡Con lo mucho que ya tenías que sufrir por mi causa! Fue una cosa horrible. ¿Cómo voy a poder pagártelo, querido? ¿Cómo es posible pagar cuando no se tiene nada que dar? ¿De qué sirven las relaciones personales cuando todo el mundo aporta cada vez menos? Tengo la impresión de que todos deberíamos volver durante siglos al desierto y tratar de hacernos mejores. Quiero empezar por el principio. Todas las cosas que creía haber aprendido no son más que un obstáculo, no

son conocimiento en absoluto. No estoy preparada para mantener relaciones personales. Pero dejémoslo, dejémoslo. Desde luego la carta de Mr. Fielding no cuenta para nada; tiene derecho a pensar y escribir lo que quiera, pero no debiera haberse mostrado grosero contigo cuando estabas tan abatido. Eso es lo que importa… No me des el brazo, ando sola maravillosamente; no, no me toques, por favor.

Mrs. McBryde se despidió de ella muy afectuosamente; era una mujer con la que Adela no tenía nada en común y cuya intimidad le resultaba opresiva. Ahora tendrían que tratarse, año tras año, hasta que se jubilara uno de sus maridos. La India inglesa se había apoderado de ella y lo había hecho a conciencia; y quizá le estaba bien empleado por haber intentado adoptar una postura autónoma. Con humildad, pero sintiéndose repelida al mismo tiempo, Adela le dio las gracias.

—Tenemos que ayudarnos entre nosotras y saber aceptar lo bueno y lo malo —dijo Mrs. McBryde.

Miss Derek también estaba allí, sin dejar de hacer chistes sobre sus cómicos maharajá y *rani*. Al requerírsela como testigo para el juicio, se había negado a devolver el automóvil de Mudkul y suponía que sus dueños estarían angustiadísimos. Tanto Mrs. McBryde como Miss Derek besaron a Miss Quested, llamándola por su nombre de pila. Luego Ronny la llevó a su casa. Era por la mañana temprano, porque a medida que avanzaba la estación caliente el día se hinchaba como un monstruo por los dos extremos, dejando cada vez un margen más pequeño para el movimiento de los mortales.

Mientras se acercaban al bungalow, Ronny dijo: —Madre tiene muchas ganas de verte, pero no hay que olvidarse de que es muy mayor. Los ancianos nunca se toman las cosas como uno espera, al menos ésa es mi opinión.

Ronny parecía prevenirla contra una inminente desilusión, pero Adela no se enteró. Su amistad con Mrs. Moore era tan profunda y tan auténtica que estaba segura de que nada podría destruirla, pasara lo que pasase.

—¿Qué puedo hacer para facilitarte las cosas? Eres tú el que lo está pasando mal —suspiró Miss Quested.

—No digas eso, querida.

—No es más que la verdad —luego exclamó—: Ronny, ¿no estará enferma ella también?

Ronny la tranquilizó: el Mayor Callendar no veía motivos de preocupación.

—Pero la vas a encontrar… irritable. Somos una familia que se irrita con facilidad. Bueno, lo vas a ver por ti misma. Estoy seguro de que mis nervios tampoco están perfectamente en orden, y cuando llegué aquel día del despacho quizás esperaba más de mi madre de lo que ella se sentía capaz de dar. Sin duda hará un esfuerzo especial en honor tuyo, pero de todas formas no quiero que tu regreso se convierta en una desilusión. No esperes demasiado.

La casa apareció ante ellos. Era una reproducción exacta del bungalow que Adela acababa de dejar. Encontraron a Mrs. Moore en un sofá, hinchada, la piel de color rojizo, con una extraña expresión de severidad. No se puso en pie al entrar ellos, y la sorpresa ante su actitud hizo que la muchacha se olvidara de sus propias tribulaciones.

—Ya estáis los dos de vuelta —fue su único recibimiento.

Miss Quested se sentó y le cogió una mano. La anciana la apartó y Adela sintió que, de la misma manera que la repelían los demás, ella repelía a Mrs. Moore.

—¿Te encuentras bien? Parecías estar perfectamente cuando salí —dijo Ronny, tratando de no hablar malhumoradamente, pero como le había pedido a su madre que recibiera a Adela con amabilidad, no pudo evitar sentirse molesto.

—No me pasa nada —dijo ella con tono desabrido—. En realidad he estado mirando mi billete de vuelta. Es intercambiable, de manera que puedo elegir entre más barcos de lo que creía.

—Podemos tratar de eso más adelante, ¿no te parece?

—Quizá Ralph y Stella quieran saber cuándo llego.

—Hay tiempo de sobra para hacer todos esos planes. ¿Qué tal encuentras a nuestra Adela?

—Confío en su ayuda para salir adelante; no sabe lo que me consuela estar otra vez con usted, todos los demás me resultan extraños ' —dijo la muchacha hablando muy de prisa.

Pero Mrs. Moore no parecía en absoluto inclinada a mostrarse servicial. Una especie de resentimiento emanaba de toda ella. Daba la impresión de estar diciendo: «¿No vais a dejarme nunca tranquila?» Su ternura cristiana había desaparecido o se había convertido en dureza, en una justa irritación contra la raza humana; Mrs. Moore no había manifestado interés por la detención de Aziz, apenas había hecho preguntas y se había negado a salir de la cama la última noche de *mubarram*, cuando se temía un ataque contra el bungalow.

—Ya sé que no es nada; tengo que ser razonable, lo intento… —siguió Adela, esforzándose de nuevo por contener las lágrimas—. No me importaría si hubiera sucedido en cualquier otro sitio; aunque tengo el consuelo de que en realidad no sé dónde sucedió.

Ronny supuso que entendía lo que Adela trataba de decir: la muchacha era incapaz de reconocer o describir la cueva; casi se negaba a dilucidar aquel punto, y se daba por seguro que la defensa trataría de aprovecharse de ello durante el juicio. Ronny se esforzó por tranquilizarla: las Cuevas de Marabar eran extraordinariamente parecidas; de hecho, se las iba a numerar en el futuro con pintura blanca.

—Sí, eso es lo que quiero decir; no sé exactamente dónde sucedió; pero además está el eco que sigo oyendo todo el tiempo.

—¿Qué es lo que te pasa con el eco? —preguntó Mrs. Moore, prestándole atención por primera vez.

—No consigo librarme de él.

—No creo que lo logres nunca.

Ronny había explicado a su madre —haciendo mucho hincapié en ello — que Adela iba a estar muy nerviosa cuando llegara a casa, por lo que el comportamiento de Mrs. Moore no tenía para él otra explicación que la mala voluntad.

—Mrs. Moore, ¿qué es ese eco?

—¿No lo sabes?

—No, ¿qué es? ¡Dígamelo, por favor! Estaba segura de que usted podría explicármelo…, me tranquilizaría tanto…

—Si no lo sabes, no lo sabes; yo no te lo puedo decir.

—Creo que es usted muy poco amable no diciéndomelo.

—Decir, decir, decir —exclamó la anciana amargamente—. ¡Como si fuera posible decir algo! Me he pasado la vida hablando o escuchando lo que dicen los demás; he escuchado demasiado. Ya es hora de que se me deje en paz. No para morirme —añadió con tono agrio—. Sin duda esperáis que me muera, pero cuando os haya visto casados a ti y a Ronny, y vuelva con los otros dos y me entere de si quieren casarse…, me retiraré a una cueva de mi propiedad. —Mrs. Moore sonrió, para situar su observación a nivel de la vida ordinaria y aumentar así su amargura—. Algún sitio donde los jóvenes no vengan a hacer preguntas esperando respuestas. Un rincón cualquiera.

—Totalmente de acuerdo, pero mientras tanto se acerca el juicio —intervino su hijo acaloradamente—, y la mayoría de nosotros pensamos que sería mejor sacar fuerzas de flaqueza y ayudarnos unos a otros, en lugar de mostrarnos desagradables. ¿Es así como vas a hablar en el estrado de los testigos?

—¿Por qué tendría yo que subir al estrado de los testigos?

—Para confirmar algunos puntos de nuestra declaración.

—Yo no tengo nada que hacer en vuestros ridículos tribunales de justicia —dijo ella, enojada—. No me arrastraréis allí de ninguna de las maneras.

—Yo tampoco quiero que vaya; no permitiré que nadie sufra más molestias por causa mía —exclamó Adela, cogiendo de nuevo la mano de Mrs. Moore, que volvió a retirarla—. Su testimonio no es en absoluto esencial.

—Pensé que querría declarar. Nadie te echa la culpa, madre, pero lo cierto es que renunciaste a seguir la visita después de la primera cueva y animaste a Adela para que continuara sola con él, mientras que si te hubieras sentido lo suficientemente bien para seguir adelante, no hubiese sucedido nada. Ya sé que él lo planeó. Pero tú caíste en la trampa, igual que Aziz y Antony antes que tú… Perdóname por decirlo sin rodeos, pero no

tienes derecho a adoptar esa actitud tan arrogante sobre los tribunales de justicia. Otra cosa sería que estuvieses enferma; pero tú dices que te encuentras perfectamente y ésa es la impresión que das; yo creía que estabas dispuesta a aceptar tu parte de responsabilidad, no me cabía la menor duda.

—No consentiré que la molestes, tanto si se encuentra bien como si no —dijo Adela, levantándose del sofá y cogiendo a Ronny del brazo; luego lo soltó dando un suspiro y se sentó de nuevo. Pero a él le agradó que la muchacha hubiese buscado su apoyo y contempló a su madre con aire condescendiente. Nunca se había sentido cómodo con ella. No era en absoluto la encantadora anciana que imaginaban los extraños, y la India había puesto de manifiesto su verdadera manera de ser.

—Asistiré a vuestra boda pero no tomaré parte en vuestro juicio —les informó Mrs. Moore, dándose palmadas sobre la rodilla; estaba muy agitada y sus gestos eran bruscos—. Luego volveré a Inglaterra…

—No puedes irte a Inglaterra en mayo; en eso estábamos todos de acuerdo.

—He cambiado de opinión.

—Bueno, será mejor que demos por terminada esta riña inesperada —dijo Ronny, paseándose por la habitación—. Parece que quieres quedarte al margen de todo, y eso es suficiente.

—Mi cuerpo, mi miserable cuerpo —suspiró la anciana—. ¿Por qué no tengo fuerza? ¿Por qué no puedo irme y desaparecer? ¿Por qué no puedo terminar con mis obligaciones y desaparecer? ¿Por qué tengo dolores de cabeza y me hincho cuando ando? Y todo el tiempo hay que hacer esto y lo de más allá, y eso como tú quieres y aquello como ella quiere, y todo simpatía y confusión y llevar unos las cargas de los otros. ¿Por qué no pueden hacerse estas cosas a mi manera y terminarlas y que yo esté tranquila? No entiendo por qué hay que hacer nada. ¿Por qué todo este casarse…? La raza humana se hubiera convertido hace siglos en una sola persona si el matrimonio sirviese para algo. Y todas esas tonterías sobre el amor, amor en una iglesia, amor en una cueva, como si hubiera la menor

diferencia, ¡y a mí se me impide ocuparme de mis asuntos por esas menudencias!

—¿Qué es lo que quieres? —dijo Ronny, muy irritado—. ¿Puedes decirlo de manera inteligible? Si es así, hazlo.

—Quiero la baraja de los solitarios.

—Muy bien, ve a buscarla.

Ronny descubrió, como se temía, que la pobre Adela estaba llorando. Y, como siempre, muy cerca de la ventana había un indio —un *mali* en este caso— recogiendo todos los sonidos procedentes de la casa. Muy afectado, Ronny guardó silencio unos momentos, pensando en su madre y sus impertinencias seniles. Ojalá nunca le hubiera pedido que viniese a la India; ojalá no tuviese ninguna obligación con ella.

—Bueno, querida; no ha sido una bienvenida muy calurosa —dijo finalmente—. Ignoraba que nos tuviese reservada esta sorpresa.

Adela no lloraba ya, y en su rostro había aparecido una expresión poco corriente, mitad de alivio, mitad de horror. —Aziz, Aziz —repitió.

Todos evitaban aquel nombre. Se había convertido en sinónimo del Poder del Mal. Aziz era «el detenido», «la persona en cuestión», «el acusado», y el sonido de aquellas sílabas vibró ahora como las primeras notas de una nueva sinfonía.

—Aziz…, ¿he cometido una equivocación?

—Estás demasiado cansada —exclamó el otro, no muy sorprendido.

—Ronny, Aziz es inocente; he cometido una terrible equivocación.

—Bueno, siéntate de todas formas.

Ronny volvió la cabeza, pero en el jardín sólo había dos gorriones persiguiéndose.

Adela obedeció, cogiéndole una mano. Él le acarició la suya; la muchacha sonrió y respiró hondo, como si hubiera salido a la superficie del agua después de estar sumergida; luego se tocó un oído.

—No me molesta tanto el eco.

—Eso está bien. Te habrás repuesto del todo en unos pocos días, pero tienes que ahorrar energías para el juicio. Das es una excelente persona y estaremos todos contigo.

—Pero, Ronny, querido, quizá no debiera haber ningún juicio.

—No entiendo en absoluto lo que dices, y me parece que tú tampoco.

—Si el doctor Aziz no es culpable habría que dejarlo en libertad. A Ronny le corrió un escalofrío que era como un presagio de muerte.

—Se le puso en libertad —dijo precipitadamente— hasta los disturbios de *muharram*, cuando hubo que encerrarlo de nuevo.

Para distraerla, Ronny le contó la historia, que los ingleses consideraban divertida. Nureddin había robado el automóvil del Nabab Bahadur, y conduciendo a oscuras en compañía de Aziz se habían metido en una cuneta, saliendo despedidos los dos, Nureddin con un corte profundo en la cara. Sus gemidos habían quedado ahogados por los gritos de los fieles y pasó mucho tiempo antes de que la policía los rescatara. A Nureddin lo llevaron al Hospital Minto y Aziz fue devuelto a la cárcel, con la acusación adicional de alterar el orden público.

—Espera un momento —le dijo Ronny cuando terminó de contar la anécdota; luego se acercó al teléfono para pedirle a Callendar que fuera a verlos lo antes posible, porque a Miss Quested no le habla sentado bien el traslado.

Cuando Ronny terminó de hablar por teléfono la muchacha se hallaba en plena crisis nerviosa, aunque esta vez fuera distinta de las anteriores.

—Ayúdame a hacer lo que tengo que hacer —sollozó, agarrándose a él — Aziz es bueno. Ya le has oído decirlo a tu madre.

—¿Qué es lo que he oído?

—Que es bueno; me he equivocado por completo al acusarle.

—Madre no ha dicho nunca eso.

—¿No lo ha dicho? —preguntó ella, deseosa de mostrarse razonable, abierta a cualquier sugerencia.

—No ha mencionado su nombre ni una sola vez.

—Pero, Ronny, yo la he oído.

—Pura ilusión. No puedes estar bien del todo si te imaginas una cosa así, ¿no es cierto?

—No, supongo que no. ¡Qué extraño, pasarme a mí estas cosas!

—He estado escuchando todo lo que ha dicho con la mayor atención posible; ya has visto que en ocasiones dice cosas incoherentes.

—Lo dijo cuando bajó tanto la voz…, hacia el final, al hablar de amor…, amor…, no pude seguirla bien, pero fue entonces cuando dijo: «El doctor Aziz no lo ha hecho.»

—¿Con esas palabras?

—La idea más que las palabras.

—No, no, querida. Te engañas completamente. Nadie ha pronunciado su nombre. Creo que estás mezclando nuestra conversación con la carta de Fielding.

—Eso ha sido, claro —exclamó ella, muy aliviada—. Sabía que había oído su nombre en algún sitio. Te estoy muy agradecida por haberlo aclarado…, es el tipo de equivocación que me preocupa, y que demuestra que estoy neurótica.

—De manera que no volverás a decir que es inocente, ¿verdad? Porque todos los criados que tengo son espías. —Ronny se acercó a la ventana. El *malí* había desaparecido, o se había transformado, más bien, en dos niños pequeños; era imposible que supieran inglés, pero los despidió sin contemplaciones—. Todos nos odian —le explicó a Adela—. No habrá problemas después de la sentencia, porque una cosa hay que decir en favor de los indios y es que aceptan los hechos consumados; pero en este momento se están gastando dinero a manos llenas para cazarnos en un traspié, y un comentario como el tuyo es precisamente lo que andan buscando. Les permitiría decir que todo ha sido una trampa preparada por nosotros, los funcionarios ingleses. Te das cuenta de lo que quiero decir, ¿no?

Mrs. Moore regresó con el mismo aire malhumorado y se dejó caer en una silla junto a la mesa para jugar a las cartas. Deseoso de aclarar la confusión, Ronny le preguntó a bocajarro si había mencionado el nombre del detenido. Como la anciana no entendió la pregunta, hubo que explicarle la razón de que se la hicieran.

—No he pronunciado su nombre —replicó, poniéndose a hacer un solitario.

—Me pareció oírle decir «Aziz es inocente», pero en realidad lo había leído en la carta de Mr. Fielding.

—Claro que es inocente —contestó Mrs. Moore con aire indiferente; era la primera vez que había expresado una opinión sobre aquel punto.

—¿Ves, Ronny? Estaba en lo cierto —dijo la muchacha.

—No tenías razón; nunca lo había dicho.

—Pero lo piensa.

—¿A quién le importa lo que piense?

—Nueve rojo sobre diez negro…

Les llegó la voz desde la mesa de jugar a las cartas.

—Puede creérselo, igual que Fielding, pero existe una cosa que se llaman pruebas, si no estoy equivocado.

—Lo sé, pero…

—¿Tengo obligación de hablar otra vez? —preguntó Mrs. Moore alzando la vista—. Así debe ser, según parece, puesto que no hacéis más que interrumpirme.

—Sólo si tienes algo razonable que decir.

—¡Qué cosa tan aburrida…!, ¡tan trivial…! —Y de la misma manera que cuando se había burlado del amor, la mente de Mrs. Moore parecía dirigirse hacia ellos desde muy lejos y saliendo de la oscuridad—. ¿Por qué sigue siendo todo mi deber? ¿Cuándo me veré libre de estas insignificancias que os preocupan tanto? Estaba él en la cueva y estabas tú también, y así continuamente… Porque un Niño nos ha nacido, un Hijo se nos ha dado[11] y ¿soy yo buena y él malo y hemos logrado salvarnos?…, y terminándolo todo, el eco.

—Ya no lo oigo tanto —dijo Adela, acercándose a Mrs. Moore—. Usted ha hecho que se vaya; usted no hace más que cosas buenas porque es muy buena.

—No soy buena, no; soy mala —hablaba con mucha más calma y se interesó otra vez por las cartas, diciendo mientras las ponía boca arriba—: Una vieja mala, muy mala, detestable. Era buena con mis hijos cuando estaban creciendo; también me encontré con ese joven en su mezquita, y yo quería que fuese feliz Gentes sin importancia, buenos y felices. Pero no

existen, no era más que un sueño… Pero no os voy a ayudar a que lo torturéis por algo que no ha hecho. Existen diferentes formas de mal y yo prefiero la mía a la vuestra.

—Tienes alguna prueba en favor del detenido? —dijo Ronny con tono de funcionario deseoso de hacer justicia—. SÍ es así, debes declarar de su parte y no de la nuestra. Nadie te lo impedirá.

—Conozco los caracteres de la gente, como vosotros los llamáis le replicó ella desdeñosamente, como si conociese algo que iba más allá del carácter pero no pudiera comunicarlo—. He oído hablar bien de él a los ingleses y a los indios, y estoy convencida de que es algo que no haría nunca.

—Endeble, madre, muy endeble.

—Extraordinariamente endeble.

—Y una gran falta de consideración con Adela.

—Sería terrible que me hubiera equivocado —dijo Adela—. Me quitaría la vida.

—¿Que advertencia te acabo de hacer? —dijo Ronny volviéndose hacia ella—. Tú sabes que tienes razón y todos nosotros lo sabemos también.

—Sí, él… Esto es horrible, absolutamente horrible. Estoy tan segura como siempre de que me siguió…, sólo que, ¿no sería posible retirar el caso? Cada vez me da más miedo tener que ir a declarar; todos os portáis tan bien con las mujeres, y tenéis mucho más poder que en Inglaterra… Fíjate en el automóvil de Miss Derek. Aunque va me doy cuenta de que no tiene nada que ver, siento mucho hacerlo mencionado; perdóname, haz el favor.

—No tiene importancia —respondió Ronny al no ocurrírsele nada mejor que decir—. Claro que te perdono, como tú lo llamas. Pero el caso tiene que verse ante los tribunales; no queda otro remedio, ya se ha puesto en marcha todo el mecanismo.

—Es ella la que lo ha puesto en marcha; y ahora tendrá que seguir hasta que termine.

Adela se sintió muy inclinada a llorar ante aquella observación tan poco amable, y Ronny cogió la lista de salidas de los barcos con una excelente

idea en la cabeza. Su madre debía irse de la India inmediatamente; se estaba haciendo daño a sí misma y a todos ellos por añadidura.

Capítulo vigésimo tercero

A Lady Mellanby, esposa del Vicegobernador de la provincia, le había agradado que las señoras de Chandrapore recurrieran a ella. No estaba en su mano hacer nada; además iba a embarcarse para Inglaterra de un momento a otro; pero expresó su deseo de que se le informara si podía colaborar de alguna forma. Mrs. Turton contestó que la madre de Mr. Heaslop estaba tratando de conseguir un pasaje, pero que se había retrasado más de la cuenta y no quedaba ya ningún camarote libre; ¿querría Lady Mellanby utilizar su influencia? Ni siquiera la esposa del Vicegobernador podía aumentar las dimensiones de un buque de línea, pero era una mujer extraordinariamente cordial y mandó un telegrama ofreciendo a la desconocida y oscura anciana compartir con ella la cabina que tenía reservada. Aquello fue como un regalo del cielo; Ronny —lleno de humildad y de gratitud— no pudo por menos de pensar que existen compensaciones para los infortunios. En la residencia del Gobernador ya se conocía su nombre debido a la pobre Adela, y ahora Mrs. Moore lo dejaría marcado en la imaginación de Lady Mellanby mientras cruzaban el océano Indico y el mar Rojo. El Magistrado Municipal sintió un renacer de ternura hacia su madre, como nos sucede a todos con nuestros familiares cuando son objeto de notorios e inesperados honores. La anciana señora no era

insignificante, aún podía despertar el interés de la esposa de un alto funcionario.

Así que Mrs. Moore consiguió todo lo que quería; evitó el juicio, la boda y la Estación Cálida; volvería a Inglaterra rodeada de atenciones y comodidades, y vería a sus otros hijos. Partió debido a la sugerencia de su hijo y también por deseo propio, pero aceptó su buena suerte sin entusiasmo. Había llegado a ese estado en que el horror y la pequeñez del universo se nacen visibles simultáneamente: ese crepúsculo de la doble visión en el que tantas personas de edad se ven envueltas. Si este mundo no nos gusta, bueno, en todo caso existe el Cielo, el Infierno, la Aniquilación, una u otra de esas realidades tan vastas, ese gigantesco escenario de estrellas, de fuego, de aire azul o negro. Toda empresa heroica, y todo lo que se conoce como arte, da por sentado que existe ese escenario, de la misma forma que todas las empresas prácticas, cuando el mundo sí nos gusta, dan por sentado que el mundo es toda la realidad. Pero en el crepúsculo de la doble visión aparece una confusión espiritual para la que no resulta posible encontrar palabras altisonantes; no podemos actuar ni prescindir de la acción, no podemos ignorar ni respetar la Infinitud. Mrs. Moore se había inclinado siempre hacia la resignación. Tan pronto como desembarcó en la India le pareció buena, y cuando vio el agua que fluía sin descanso por el estanque de la mezquita, o el Ganges, o la luna, apresada en el manto de la noche con todas las estrellas, la resignación le pareció una meta muy hermosa y muy sencilla. ¡Identificarse con el universo! Algo tan simple y lleno de dignidad. Pero siempre había que llevar a cabo antes algún pequeño deber, alguna nueva carta que retirar de la baraja para ponerla boca arriba y colocarla, y, mientras perdía el tiempo con menudencias, las Cuevas de Marabar habían hecho sonar su gong.

¿Qué le había hablado en aquella pulimentada cavidad de granito? ¿Qué moraba en la primera de las cuevas? Algo muy viejo y muy pequeño. Anterior al tiempo, y también anterior al espacio. Una cosa roma, incapaz de generosidad: el gusano mismo que no muere. Desde el momento en que oyó su voz, Mrs. Moore no había acariciado una sola idea importante: en realidad sentía envidia de Adela. ¡Tantas alharacas por una muchacha

asustada! No había sucedido nada, «y si hubiese», pensaba Mrs. Moore con el cinismo de una ajada sacerdotisa, «si hubiese sucedido, hay cosas peores que el amor». El incalificable intento se le presentaba como amor: en una cueva, en una iglesia…, *boum*, el resultado es el mismo. Se supone que las visiones llevan consigo profundidad, pero… ¡espera a tener una, lector amigo! También el abismo puede ser mezquino, la serpiente de la eternidad estar hecha de gusanos; la idea constante de Mrs. Moore era que «A mi futura nuera se le debería prestar menos atención que a mí, ya que no hay dolor como mi dolor», aunque si alguien le prestaba atención, la rechazaba, irritada.

Su hijo no pudo acompañarla a Bombay, porque la situación local seguía siendo crítica, y todos los funcionarios tenían que permanecer en sus puestos. Antony tampoco podía ir, porque existía la posibilidad de que no volviera nunca a prestar declaración como testigo. De manera que Mrs. Moore viajó sin nadie que le pudiera recordar el pasado. Esto suponía un alivio. El calor se había retirado un poco antes de su siguiente avance, y el viaje no fue desagradable. Cuando Mrs. Moore abandonó Chandrapore, la luna, otra vez llena, brillaba sobre el Ganges y transformaba en hilos de plata los canales sin apenas caudal, para luego cambiar de dirección y filtrarse por la ventanilla del departamento. El rápido y confortable tren correo se deslizó con ella atravesando la noche y, durante todo el día siguiente, Mrs. Moore cruzó la India Central, entre paisajes calcinados que, sin embargo, no tenían la irremediable melancolía de la llanura. Contempló la indestructible vida del hombre y sus rostros cambiantes, y las casas que había construido para sí mismo y para Dios, y se le aparecieron no en relación con sus propias dificultades personales, sino como simples cosas que ver. Había, por ejemplo, un lugar llamado Asirgarh, por el que pasó a la puesta del sol e identificó en el mapa: una enorme fortaleza entre colinas boscosas. Nadie le había hablado nunca de Asirgarh, pero tenía nobles baluartes de gran tamaño, y a su derecha se hallaba una mezquita. En seguida se olvidó de ello. Diez minutos después, Asirgarh reapareció. Ahora la mezquita quedaba a la izquierda de los baluartes. El tren, en su descenso a través de los montes Vindhya, había descrito un semicírculo

alrededor de Asirgarh. ¿Con qué podía Mrs. Moore relacionar aquella fortaleza excepto con el nombre de Asirgarh? Con nada; no conocía a nadie que viviera allí. Pero sus torres habían mirado dos veces a la anciana como diciéndole: «Yo no desaparezco.» Mrs. Moore se despertó sobresaltada a medianoche, porque el tren estaba descendiendo entre los farallones occidentales. Sus cumbres, iluminadas por la luna, corrían hacia ella como las olas del mar sobre la arena de la playa; después de un breve trayecto sobre la llanura, apareció el mar auténtico y el nebuloso amanecer de Bombay. «No he visto los sitios más importantes», pensó Mrs. Moore, al contemplar, encerrado entre los andenes de la estación Victoria, el final de los raíles que la habían transportado a través de un continente y que nunca volverían a llevarla en dirección contraria. Nunca visitaría Asirgarh ni los otros sitios todavía intactos; ni Delhi ni Agrá ni las ciudades del Rajputana ni Cachemira, ni las maravillas aún más humildes que brillaban a veces a través de las palabras de los hombres: la roca bilingüe de Girnar, la estatua de Shri Belgola, las ruinas de Mandu y de Hampi, los templos de Kha juraho y los jardines de Shalímar. Mientras atravesaba en coche la enorme ciudad que el Occidente ha construido para abandonar después con un gesto de desesperación, Mrs. Moore tuvo deseos muy intensos de pararse —aunque no era más que Bombay y aprender a reconocer los cientos de indios que se cruzaban unos a otros en las calles. Pero los cascos de los caballos siguieron transportándola, y muy pronto el barco se hizo a la mar y alrededor del fondeadero fueron apareciendo miles de cocoteros que subían por las colinas para decirle adiós. «¿De manera que creíste que un eco era la India? ¿Que las Cuevas de Marabar eran la última palabra?», repetían riendo. «¿Qué tenemos nosotros en común con ellas, o ellas con Asirgarh? ¡Adiós!» Luego el buque dio la vuelta alrededor de Colaba[12], el continente giró tras ellos, y el risco de los Ghats se deshizo en la calina del mar del trópico. Lady Mellanby le aconsejó que no se quedara quieta bajo el sol.

—Hemos salido sanas y salvas de la sartén —dijo la esposa del Vicegobernador—; no tendría sentido caerse ahora en el fuego.

Capítulo vigésimo cuarto

Utilizando repentinos cambios de velocidad, el calor siguió su avance después de la marcha de Mrs. Moore hasta que fue preciso soportar la existencia y castigar los delitos con el termómetro a cuarenta y cuatro grados. Los ventiladores eléctricos zumbaban y removían el aire, el agua salpicaba los biombos, los trozos de hielo se entrechocaban, mientras en el exterior, más allá de estas defensas, entre un cielo grisáceo y una tierra amarillenta, las nubes de polvo se morían dubitativas. En Europa la vida se refugia huyendo del frío, y el resultado han sido unos mitos exquisitos nacidos junto al fuego de las chimeneas —Balder, Perséfone—, pero en la India la huida es de la fuente de la vida, del sol traicionero, y no existe poesía para adornarla, porque la desilusión no puede ser hermosa. Los hombres suspiran por la poesía, aunque quizá no lo confiesen; desean que la alegría tenga donaire, el dolor nobleza y el infinito forma, pero la India no les proporciona esas satisfacciones. La confusión anual durante el mes de abril, cuando irritabilidad y lascivia se extienden como un cáncer, es uno de sus comentarios sobre las pertinaces esperanzas de la humanidad. Los peces salen mejor parados: al secarse los estanques se introducen entre el cieno del fondo y esperan a que vengan las lluvias a limpiarlos. Pero los hombres tratan de vivir armoniosamente durante todo el año, y a veces los resultados son desastrosos. La triunfante máquina de la civilización puede atascarse

repentinamente y quedar inmovilizada, convertida en coche de piedra, y en esos momentos el destino de los ingleses parece semejarse al de sus predecesores, que también entraron en el país con el propósito de darle una nueva forma, pero terminaron acomodándose a sus pautas, cubiertos por el mismo polvo que sus otros habitantes.

Después de años de intelectualismo, Adela había reanudado sus plegarias matutinas al Dios de los cristianos. No parecía que hubiese ningún mal en ello; era el camino más corto y más fácil para llegar lo invisible, y la muchacha podía hilvanar sus problemas en el entramado. De la misma manera que los oficinistas hindúes evitan de Laksmi[13] un aumento de sueldo, Miss Quested imploraba a Vahveh para que le concediera una sentencia favorable. El os que salva al Rey apoyaría también, sin duda alguna, a la polideidad le respondía consoladoramente, pero el contacto de las manos con la piel de la cara le empezaba a producir un sarpullido y le parecía seguir tragando y expectorando el mismo coágulo de aire insípido que le había oprimido los pulmones durante toda la noche. La voz de Mrs. Turton vino también a distraerla, resonando en la habitación contigua.

—¿Está usted preparada, jovencita?

—Medio minuto —murmuró Adela.

Los Turton la habían hospedado al marcharse Mrs. Moore. Su amabilidad rozaba lo increíble, pero era su situación, y no su personalidad, lo que la motivaba: se trataba de la chica inglesa que había sufrido la terrible experiencia, y todo lo que se hiciera por ella era poco. Nadie, excepto Ronny, tenía la menor idea de lo que pasaba por su cabeza, e incluso su prometido era tan sólo vagamente consciente.

Abrumada por la tristeza, Adela le había dicho: «Sólo te traigo complicaciones; tenía yo razón cuando hablamos en el Maidan, más valdría que nos contentáramos con ser amigos», pero Ronny protestó, porque cuanto mayores eran los sufrimientos de Adela, en más alta estima la tenía. ¿Estaba enamorada de él? Aquella pregunta se hallaba de alguna forma mezclada con las Colinas de Marabar, y Adela le había dado vueltas antes de entrar en la fatídica cueva. ¿Era capaz de querer a alguien?

—Miss Quested, Adela, como mejor le parezca, son las siete y media; tendríamos que pensar en ponernos en camino hacia el juzgado cuando se encuentre usted dispuesta.

—Está rezando —intervino la voz del Administrador, también desde la habitación vecina.

—Lo siento, querida; tómese todo el tiempo que quiera… ¿Estaba bien su *chota hazril?*.

—No soy capaz de comer; ¿podría tomar un poco de brandy? —preguntó la muchacha, renunciando a Yahveh.

Cuando se lo trajeron, se estremeció al olerlo y dijo que estaba lista antes de salir.

—Bébaselo; no es mala idea tomar un trago.

—En realidad no creo que me ayude, *Burra Sabib*.

—Has mandado brandy al juzgado, ¿verdad, Mary?

—Creo que sí, y también champaña.

—Les daré las gracias esta noche; ahora estoy destrozada —dijo la muchacha, pronunciando cada sílaba con gran cuidado, como si su problema pudiera disminuir si se le definía con claridad. Tenía miedo de excederse en la discreción, de que algo que ella no percibía tomase forma por debajo de sus palabras, y había estado ensayando con Mr. McBryde, de una manera extraña y melindrosa, el relato de su terrible aventura en la cueva; cómo el hombre nunca había llegado a tocarla, pero la había arrastrado, y todo lo demás. Su propósito aquella mañana era anunciar, con toda meticulosidad, que la tensión era terrible, y que probablemente se derrumbaría ante el interrogatorio de Mr. Amritrao y avergonzaría a sus amigos.

—Vuelvo a oír el eco con más fuerza —les dijo al Administrador y a su mujer.

—¿Qué tal una aspirina?

—No es un dolor de cabeza, es un eco.

El Mayor Callendar, incapaz de eliminar el zumbido de sus oídos, había diagnosticado que se trataba de una fantasía y que había que evitar darle alas. De manera que los Turton cambiaron de tema. La breve caricia de la

brisa matutina pasaba sobre la tierra en aquellos momentos, dividiendo la noche del día; cesaría al cabo de diez minutos, pero podían aprovecharla para trasladarse al centro desde la zona residencial.

—Estoy segura de que voy a derrumbarme —repitió Adela.

—Ya verá como no —dijo el Administrador, con voz llena de ternura.

—Claro que no, Adela es una gran chica.

—Pero, Mrs. Turton…

—¿Sí. querida?

—Aunque perdiera la serenidad no tendría importancia. Sería distinto en otros procesos, pero no en éste. Yo me lo digo a mí misma de la siguiente manera: aunque pierda el control, y llore y haga cosas absurdas, tengo la seguridad de lograr una sentencia favorable, a no ser que Mr. Das sea terriblemente injusto.

—No tiene usted más remedio que ganar —dijo el Administrador con mucha calma, sin recordar a Adela que, inevitablemente, habría también una apelación.

El Nabab Bahadur financiaba la defensa, y se arruinaría antes de permitir que «pereciera un musulmán inocente»; y aún quedaban otros intereses, menos respetables, en un segundo término. El caso podía trasladarse de un tribunal a otro, con consecuencias que ningún funcionario estaba en condiciones de prever. Bajo sus mismos ojos, la actitud de Chandrapore se estaba modificando. Cuando el coche de Mr. Turton abandonó la residencia, un guijarro lanzado por un niño se estrelló contra la carrocería, en gesto de ridícula indignación. Cerca de la mezquita las piedras arrojadas eran de mayor tamaño. En el Maidan les esperaba un pelotón de policías nativos con motocicletas para escoltarles a través de los bazares.

—McBryde se comporta como una vieja —murmuró el Administrador, que estaba bastante irritado.

—Realmente —dijo Mrs. Turton—, después de *muharram* una demostración de fuerza no vendría mal; es ridículo seguir fingiendo que no nos odian; tienes que abandonar esa farsa.

—Yo no les odio; no sé por qué, pero no les odio —respondió Mr. Turton con una voz extraña, llena de tristeza; y era cierto que no les odiaba; porque si así fuera tendría que condenar su propia carrera como una mala inversión. El Administrador aún conservaba un desdeñoso afecto por los peones que había movido durante tantos años; tenían que ser merecedores de sus desvelos. «Al fin y al cabo, son nuestras mujeres las que hacen que todo sea más difícil», fue lo que pensó al ver algunas palabras obscenas sobre un largo muro vacío; y bajo su caballerosidad hacia Miss Quested acechaba el resentimiento, esperando su oportunidad: quizás haya siempre una pizca de resentimiento en todas las actitudes caballerosas. Delante del juzgado se habían reunido algunos estudiantes: muchachos histéricos con los que Mr. Turton se habría enfrentado si hubiese ido solo, pero le dijo al chófer que diera la vuelta para entrar por la parte trasera del edificio. Los estudiantes se burlaron, y Rafi (escondiéndose detrás de un compañero para no ser identificado) gritó que los ingleses eran unos cobardes.

Cuando llegaron al despacho privado de Ronny ya se había reunido allí un grupo de los suyos. Ninguno se mostraba acobardado, pero todos estaban nerviosos, porque no dejaban de llegarles extrañas noticias. Los basureros acababan de declararse en huelga y, en consecuencia, no era posible utilizar la mitad de los excusados de Chandrapore; sólo la mitad, y además los basureros del distrito, menos afectados por el proceso del doctor Aziz, llegarían por la tarde y darían al traste con la huelga, pero ¿por qué tenía que producirse un incidente tan grotesco? Y cierto número de damas musulmanas había jurado no comer hasta que el detenido fuera absuelto; su muerte no supondría una gran diferencia, porque, siendo invisibles, era como si ya estuviesen muertas; pero, en cualquier caso, resultaba inquietante. Un nuevo espíritu parecía extenderse por todas partes, un orden distinto que ninguno de los miembros del reducido grupo de ingleses era capaz de explicar. Había una tendencia a ver a Fielding detrás de todo ello; nadie aceptaba ya la idea de que fuese débil y estuviera mal de la cabeza. Todos le atacaron con gran energía: se le había visto llegar al juzgado con los dos abogados de la defensa, Amritrao y Mahmoud Ali; animaba el movimiento de los exploradores por razones sediciosas; recibía cartas con

sellos extranjeros, y era probablemente un espía japonés. La sentencia que iba a pronunciarse significaría el fin de aquel renegado, pero el daño que ya había hecho a su país y al Imperio era incalculable. Mientras los otros lanzaban sus acusaciones contra Fielding, Miss Quested permanecía recostada con las manos en los brazos del sillón y los ojos cerrados, reservando sus energías para el juicio. Al cabo de un rato se dieron cuenta de su presencia y se sintieron avergonzados de hacer tanto ruido.

—¿No podemos hacer nada por ti? —dijo Miss Derek.

—Me parece que no, Nancy, y creo que yo tampoco soy capaz de hacer nada por mí misma.

—Se te ha prohibido terminantemente que hables así; eres maravillosa.

—Claro que sí —intervino, reverente, el coro.

—El viejo Das es un buen tipo —dijo Ronny, iniciando un nuevo tema de conversación en voz bastante baja.

—Ninguno de ellos es buena persona —le contradijo el Mayor Callendar.

—Das si que lo es, de verdad.

—Quiere usted decir que le asusta más absolver que condenar, porque si absuelve al acusado perderá su puesto —dijo Lesley con una risita maliciosa.

En realidad era eso lo que Ronny quería decir, pero además se hacía «ilusiones» sobre sus propios subordinados (siguiendo en esto las mejores tradiciones del cuerpo de funcionarios al que pertenecía), y le gustaba sostener que el bueno de Das poseía de hecho el valor moral que se inculca en los colegios privados ingleses. Hizo notar que —desde cierto punto de vista— era una buena cosa que un indio se encargara del caso. La condena era inevitable; así que más valía que la pronunciara un indio, porque eso causaría menos problemas a la larga. Muy interesado en aquel razonamiento, Ronny fue despreocupándose cada vez más de Adela.

—De hecho, está usted diciendo que no aprueba la petición que mandé a Lady Mellanby —dijo Mrs. Turton, con considerable acaloramiento—. Por favor, Mr. Heaslop, no se disculpe; ya estoy acostumbrada a descubrir que cometo equivocaciones.

—No era eso lo que quería decir.

—Muy bien. Ya le he dicho que no se disculpe.

—Esos cerdos siempre están a la caza de algún agravio —dijo Lesley, con intención de aplacar a Mrs. Turton.

—Cerdos, ya lo creo que sí —le hizo eco el Mayor—. Y algo más que les voy a decir en seguida. Lo que ha sucedido es una cosa estupenda, de verdad, exceptuando, por supuesto, lo que han sufrido algunos de los presentes. Porque van a tener que chillar y ya es hora de que chillen. Al menos en el hospital ya les he metido el santo temor de Dios en el cuerpo. Tendrían ustedes que ver al nieto del hombre considerado hasta hace poco como principal partidario del Gobierno. —Callendar estuvo riendo entre clientes mientras describía el actual aspecto del pobre Nureddin—. No volverá a presumir de guapo; le faltan cinco dientes de arriba, dos de abajo, y la nariz rota… El viejo Panna Lal le trajo ayer el espejo y se echó a llorar… Yo me reí; me reí y les aseguro que ustedes hubieran hecho lo mismo; antes era uno de esos sucios negros que se las dan de elegantes, pensé, ahora no es más que un montón de basura; no se merece otra cosa, maldito sea…, estoy convencido de que era terriblemente inmoral… —Se fue serenando al darle alguien un suave toque en el costado, pero añadió aún—: También me hubiera gustado ocuparme de mi antiguo asistente; todo es poco para esa gente.

—Por fin hay alguien que dice cosas razonables —exclamó Mrs. Turton, causando gran desazón en su marido.

—Eso es lo que yo digo; mi opinión es que no se puede hablar de crueldad después de una cosa como ésta.

—Exactamente, y recuérdenlo después, caballeros. Son ustedes débiles, muy débiles. ¡Claro que sí! Esos indios tendrían que ir a gatas desde aquí hasta las cuevas cada vez que apareciese una inglesa; habría que negarles el saludo, escupirles, hacerles tragar el polvo; hemos sido demasiado amables con nuestros *Bridge Parties* y todo lo demás.

Mrs. Turton hizo una pausa. El calor la había invadido aprovechándose de su indignación, por lo que se consagró a la limonada, pero sin dejar de murmurar: «Débiles, débiles» entre sorbo y sorbo. Poco después se repitió

todo el proceso. Como los problemas que Miss Quested había hecho salir a la luz eran mucho más importantes que ella misma, los demás la olvidaban inevitablemente.

En seguida empezó la vista del juicio.

A los ingleses les precedieron sus sillas en la sala del tribunal, porque era importante que se les tratara con especial respeto. Y una vez que los *chuprassis* lo prepararon todo, entraron ellos en el destartalado salón con aire condescendiente, como si se tratara de la caseta de una feria. El Administrador hizo un chiste protocolario mientras se sentaba y provocó la sonrisa de sus acompañantes; los indios, que no llegaron a oír lo que había dicho, pensaron que estaban preparando alguna nueva crueldad, porque de lo contrario los *sabios* no se reirían entre dientes.

La sala se hallaba abarrotada y, por supuesto, hacía mucho calor. La primera persona en la que Adela se fijó fue en el más humilde de toaos los presentes, alguien que no tenía, oficialmente, ninguna relación con el juicio: el nombre que movía el *punkah*. Casi desnudo y espléndidamente formado, se hallaba encima de un estrado, cerca del fondo, en medio del pasillo central, y captó la atención de la muchacha nada más entrar, dándole la impresión de que era él quien controlaba la marcha del proceso. Aquel individuo tenía la fuerza y la belleza que florece ocasionalmente en los indios de extracción humilde. Cuando esa extraña raza está ya cerca del polvo y se la condena como intocable, la naturaleza recuerda la perfección física que consigue en otros sitios, y produce un dios.,., nunca son muchos, tan sólo uno aquí y allá, para demostrarle a U sociedad lo poco que le impresionan sus categorías. Aquel hombre hubiera llamado la atención en cualquier sitio, pero entre las mediocridades de Chandrapore, con sus piernas como palillos y sus pechos hundidos, destacaba como un ser divino, aunque fuese uno más de la ciudad, y se hubiera alimentado con su basura y estuviese condenado a terminar en sus montones de desperdicios. Tirando de la cuerda y soltándola rítmicamente, lanzando sobre otros remolinos de aire que a él no le llegaban, parecía —como personificación del hado y aventador de almas— distanciarse de cualquier destino humano. Frente a él, también sobre otro estrado, se sentaba el Magistrado Auxiliar, un hombre de

pequeña estatura, educado, tímido y meticuloso. El *punkah-wallab* no era ninguna de aquellas cosas; apenas tenía conciencia de su propia existencia y no entendía por qué la sala del tribunal estaba más llena que de ordinario; de hecho no sabía que estaba más llena que de ordinario, ni siquiera sabía que manejaba un ventilador, aunque sí tenía conciencia de tirar de una cuerda. Hubo algo en su indiferencia que impresionó a la muchacha inglesa de clase media; algo como un reproche a lo mezquino de sus sufrimientos. ¿En virtud de qué había congregado ella a tanta gente en aquella habitación? Sus opiniones particulares y el Yahveh de barrio residencial que las santificaba, ¿con qué derecho se atribuían tanta importancia en el mundo y se arrogaban el título de civilización? Mrs. Moore… Adela buscó a su alrededor, pero Mrs. Moore estaba muy lejos, en el mar; era el tipo de problema que quizás hubiesen analizado en el viaje desde Inglaterra, antes de que la anciana se volviera tan extraña y desagradable.

Mientras pensaba en Mrs. Moore, Adela empezó a oír sonidos que fueron haciéndose gradualmente más precisos. El proceso destinado a hacer época estaba comenzando, y el Superintendente de la policía había tomado la palabra como representante del ministerio fiscal.

Mr. McBryde no se esforzaba por ser un orador interesante; dejaba la elocuencia para la defensa, que sí iba a necesitarla. Su actitud era «Todo el mundo sabe que este hombre es culpable, pero yo me veo obligado a decirlo en público antes de mandarlo a cumplir su sentencia en las islas Andaman». No recurrid ni a las emociones y sólo gradualmente la estudiada negligencia de su actitud se dejó sentir, logrando enfurecer a parte del público. Fue describiendo laboriosamente la génesis de la excursión. El procesado había conocido a Miss Quested en una merienda ofrecida por el director del Instituto, concibiendo desde aquel momento sus propósitos en relación con la demandante: el detenido era un detenido era un hombre vida disoluta, como lo testimoniarían los documentos que se le encontraron en el momento de su arresto; su colega el doctor Panna Lal, estaba en condiciones de dar luz sobre su carácter, y el mismo Mayor Callendar también hablaría por su parte. Aquí Mr. McBryde hizo una pausa. Quería mantener el proceso lo limpió posible, pero la Patología oriental, su tema

favorito, le rodeaba por todas partes y fue incapaz de resistirse a su influjo. las gafas, como era su costumbre antes de proclamar una verdad carácter general, contempló a sus oyentes con gesto triste y señalo que las razas de piel más oscura se sienten físicamente atraídas por las de piel más clara, pero no al revés; esto no debía ser motivo de amargura, ni motivo de insultos, sino simplemente un hecho que cualquier observador científico estaba en condiciones de confirmar.

—¿Aunque la señora sea mucho más fea que el caballero?

El comentario no pareció salir de ningún sitio; dio más bien la impresión de caer del cielo. Era la primera interrupción, y el presidente del tribunal se sintió obligado a censurarla.

—Expulsen a ese hombre —dijo.

Uno de los policías nativos tomó del brazo a un espectador que no había dicho nada y lo sacó de la sala con bastante brusquedad. Mr. McBryde volvió a ponerse las gafas y siguió adelante. Pero el comentario había perturbado a Miss Quested. A su cuerpo le molestaba que lo llamaran feo, y se estremeció.

—¿Te sientes mareada, Adela? —le preguntó Miss Derek, que cuidaba de ella con amorosa indignación.

—Últimamente nunca siento otra cosa, Nancy. Saldré adelante pero es terrible, terrible.

Esto provocó la primera de una serie de escenas. Los amigos de Miss Quested empezaron a agitarse a su alrededor, y el Mayor exclamo clamó:

—Estas condiciones no son adecuadas para mi paciente; ¿por que no se le permite sentarse sobre el estrado? En el sitio donde se encuentra no recibe nada de aire.

Aunque Mr. Das pareció molestarse, dijo:

—No tengo inconveniente en que Miss Quested se siente aquí p0 consideración a su estado de salud.

Los *chuprassis* no subieron una, sino varias sillas, y todo el grupo se instaló con Adela sobre el estrado. Mr. Fielding era ya el único europeo en el nivel más bajo.

—Esto está mejor —hizo notar Mrs. Turton mientras terminaba de acomodarse.

—Un cambio muy deseable por varias razones —replicó el Mayor.

El Presidente comprendió que debía censurar aquella observación, pero no se atrevió a hacerlo. Callendar se dio cuenta de que estaba asustado y exclamó con entonación autoritaria:

—De acuerdo, McBryde, siga adelante; siento haberle interrumpido.

—¿Se encuentran bien todos ustedes? —preguntó el Superintendente.

—Saldremos adelante, saldremos adelante.

—Siga, Mr. Das, no estamos aquí para entorpecer su tarea —dijo el Administrador General, con aire protector.

En realidad, más que entorpecer el proceso se habían hecho cargo de él.

Mientras el fiscal continuaba su exposición, Miss Quested examinó la sala; al principio tímidamente, como si fuera a abrasarle los ojos. A izquierda y derecha del hombre del *punkah* vio muchas caras conocidas a medias. Por debajo de ella estaba reunido todo lo que quedaba de su estúpida pretensión de ver la India: las personas que Mrs. Moore y ella habían conocido en el *Bridge Party*, el matrimonio que no les había mandado su coche, diferentes criados, aldeanos, funcionarios, y el procesado mismo. Allí estaba sentado: un indio de poca estatura, pero fuerte y pulcro, con el pelo muy negro y manos flexibles. Adela le contempló sin especial emoción. Desde su último encuentro, la muchacha le había convertido en un ser maligno, pero ahora parecía ser lo que siempre había sido: alguien a quien apenas conocía. Una persona sin importancia, desprovisto de significado, tan descarnado como un hueso, y aunque «culpable», no le rodeaba en absoluto una atmósfera de pecado. «Supongo que *es* culpable. ¿Existe la posibilidad de que me haya equivocado?», pensó Adela. Porque aquella pregunta todavía se le presentaba ante el entendimiento, si bien desde la marcha de Mrs. Moore había dejado de turbar su conciencia.

El abogado defensor, Mahmoud Ali, se levantó a continuación para preguntar con recargada y poco oportuna ironía si no sería posible nacerle un sitio a su cliente en el estrado: también los indios se sentían indispuestos

a veces, aunque, naturalmente, el Mayor Callendar no pensara así, por ser el responsable de un hospital del Gobierno.

—Otro ejemplo de su exquisito sentido del humor —exclamó Miss Derek.

Ronny miró a Mr. Das para ver cómo» resolvía la dificultad. El presidente del tribunal dio síntomas de nerviosismo y reprendió a Mahmoud Ali con severidad.

—Perdóneme… —era el turno del eminente abogado de Calcuta, un hombre apuesto, de aventajada estatura, huesos prominentes, y cabello gris que llevaba muy corto—. Protestamos contra la presencia en el estrado de tantas damas y caballeros europeos —dijo con impecable acento de Oxford —. Conseguirán intimidar a nuestros testigos. Esas personas deben estar en la sala, con el resto del público. No nos oponemos a que Miss Quested siga en el estrado, dado su estado de salud; nos proponemos tener con ella las mayores muestras posibles de cortesía, a pesar de las verdades científicas que el Superintendente de policía del distrito ha tenido a bien revelarnos; pero nos opondremos a la presencia de los demás.

—Ya está bien de cacareo; lo que queremos es la sentencia —gruñó el Mayor.

El distinguido visitante fijó respetuosamente la vista en el presidente del tribunal.

—Estoy de acuerdo con eso —dijo Mr. Das, ocultando desesperadamente el rostro detrás de unos papeles—. Yo sólo he dado permiso a Miss Quested para sentarse aquí arriba. Sus amigos tendrán la amabilidad de bajar otra vez.

—Bien hecho, Das, totalmente correcto —dijo Ronny con abrumadora sinceridad.

—¡Obligarnos a bajar! ¡Qué increíble impertinencia! —exclamó Mrs. Turton.

—No alborotes, Mary —murmuró su marido.

—Mi paciente no puede quedar desatendida.

—¿Se opone usted a que siga también aquí el Cirujano-Jefe, Mr. Amritrao?

—No me queda más remedio que hacerlo. Un estrado confiere autoridad.

—Aunque no tenga más que un pie de altura; será mejor que bajemos todos —dijo el Administrador General, tratando de tomar a broma.

—Muchas gracias, señor —dijo Mr. Das, muy aliviado—. Gracias, Mr. Heaslop; gracias también a todas ustedes, señoras.

Y el grupo entero, Miss Quested incluida, descendió de su precipitada eminencia. La noticia de su humillación se extendió rápidamente y se oyeron las burlas de la gente que esperaba fuera. Las sillas especiales acompañaron a los ingleses en su caída. Mahmoud Ali (a quien el odio hacía decir cosas ridículas y completamente inútiles) protestó también contra las sillas; ¿con qué autoridad se habían traído?, ¿por qué no se le daba una al Nabab Bahadur?, La gente empezó a hablar por toda la sala sobre sillas ordinarias y especiales, tiráis de alfombra y estrados de un pie de altura.

Pero aquella breve excursión había tenido un efecto positivo sobre los nervios de Miss Quested. Se sentía más cómoda después de haber visto a todas las personas que se encontraban en U sala. Era como saber lo peor. Ahora ya estaba segura de que saldría bien de aquello, es decir, sin deshonra espiritual, e hizo llegar la buena noticia a Ronny y a Mrs. Turton. Pero a estos últimos les había afectado demasiado la derrota sufrida por el prestigio británico para sentirse interesados. Desde su asiento, Adela podía ver a Mr. Fielding, renegado. Lo había visto mejor desde el estrado y sabía que un niño indio estaba subido en sus rodillas. El Director del Instituto con templaba la marcha del proceso y también la miraba a ella. Cuando los ojos se encontraron, él apartó la vista, como si el contacto directo no le interesara.

El presidente del tribunal también estaba contento. Había ganado la batalla del estrado y sentía más confianza en sí mismo. Con inteligencia e imparcialidad siguió escuchando las declaraciones, y trató de olvidar que más adelante tendría que pronunciar un veredicto que estuviese de acuerdo con las pruebas presentadas. El Superintendente siguió adelante con paso firme; había contado con aquellos estallidos de insolencia —eran los

lógicos gestos de una raza inferior-y no dejaba traslucir odio alguno hacia Aziz; tan sólo un desprecio infinito.

La exposición de McBryde se extendió considerablemente sobre las personas «que se habían dejado engañar por el detenido»: Fielding, el criado Antony, el Nabab Bahaaur. A Miss Quested siempre le había parecido dudoso este aspecto del caso, y había pedido al policía que no lo desarrollara mucho. Pero la comunidad inglesa estaba empeñada en conseguir una larga condena y quería probar que el ataque había sido premeditado. Y con el fin de ilustrar la estrategia del acusado presentaron un mapa de las Colinas de Marabar, mostrando el camino seguido por la expedición, y el «Estanque de la Daga», donde habían instalado el campamento.

El presidente del tribunal manifestó interés por la arqueología.

Le fue presentado un modelo en alzada de una de las cuevas; llevaba un cartel que decía: «Cueva budista.»

—Creo que no es budista, sino jainí.

—¿En qué cueva se afirma que se cometió el delito, en la budista o en la jainí? —preguntó Mahmoud Ali, con aire de estar desenmascarando una conspiración.

—Todas las cuevas de Marabar son jainíes.

—De acuerdo; en ese caso, ¿en cuál de las cuevas jainíes?

—Tendrá usted ocasión de hacer esas preguntas más adelante.

Mr. McBryde sonrió débilmente ante tu estupidez. Los indio» invariablemente se venían abajo con cuestiones como aquélla. El Superintendente sabía que la defensa albergaba la absurda esperanza de establecer una coartada; que habían tratado (sin éxito) de identificar al guía; y que Fielding y Hamidullah habían ido al Kawa Dol y lo habían recorrido y medido durante una noche de luna.

—Mr. Lesley dice que son budistas, y si hay alguien que lo sepa debe de ser él. Pero ¿puedo llamar la atención sobre su atención sobre su fortuna?. Y paso a describir lo que había sucedido allí. Luego habló de la llegada de Miss Derek, del precipitado descenso por el barranco; regreso de las dos señoritas a Chandrapore y del documento firmado por Miss Quested al

llegar, en el que se hacía mención de los prismáticos. Y a continuación llegó la prueba definitiva: el hallazgo de los prismáticos en posesión del procesado—. De momento no tengo nada más que añadir —concluyó, quitándose las gafas. Ahora procederé a llamar a mis testigos. Los hechos hablarán por si solos. El procesado es una de esas personas que llevan una doble vida. Me atrevo a decir que ha ido degenerando gradualmente, y. que se ha mostrado muy hábil en la tarea de ocultar sus como suele suceder en estos casos, por lo que ha fingido ser un miembro respetable de la sociedad y ha logrado incluso un puesto gubernamental. En la actualidad está totalmente entregado al vicio y más allá de toda posible redención, mucho me temo. Se comporto de la manera más cruel y brutal que imaginarse pueda con otra de sus invitadas, también inglesa. Para librarse de ella, y quedar así en libertad de perpetrar su delito, estuvo a punto de aplastarla entre sus criados en una de las cuevas, dicho sea de paso.

Pero sus últimas palabras provocaron una nueva tormenta y de repente, otro nombre, el de Mrs. Moore, irrumpió en un torbellino. Mahmoud Ali, muy encolerizado, se dejó los nervios; gritando como un loco preguntó si se acusaba a su cliente de asesinato y, quiso saber quién aquella segunda señora inglesa.

—No me propongo llamarla como testigo.

—No lo hará porque no puede, ya que la han sacado del país ha escondidas; esa señora es Mrs. Moore, que hubiera probado la inocencia del acusado; estaba de nuestra parte, era amiga de los pobres indios.

—También usted podía haberla llamado a declarar —exclamo el presidente—. Como ninguna de las dos partes la ha llamado, nadie puede utilizar su testimonio.

—Nos fue ocultada hasta que ya era demasiado tarde…, lo supe demasiado tarde; ésa es la justicia inglesa, eso es lo que significa la soberanía británica. Devuélvannos a Mrs. Moore tan sólo por cinco minutos y salvará a mi amigo, salvará el nombre de sus hijos; no la excluya, Mr. Das; desdígase de esas palabras que ha pronunciado porque también usted es padre; dígame qué han hecho con ella" qué ha sido de Mrs. Moore…

—Por si acaso tiene algún interés, les diré que mi madre debe de haber llegado a Aden —dijo Ronny con sequedad; no debiera haber intervenido, pero aquel furioso ataque le sobresaltó.

—Ustedes la han llevado allí porque sabía la verdad. —Mahmoud Ali estaba casi fuera de sí, y se le oyó decir a pesar del tumulto—: Estoy arruinando mi carrera, pero no importa; nos van a arruinar a todos, uno a uno.

—Ésa no es manera de defender su caso —le aconsejó el presidente.

—Ni yo estoy defendiendo un caso ni usted lo está juzgando. Los dos no somos más que esclavos.

—Mr. Mahmoud Ali, ya le he hecho una advertencia, y a menos que vuelva usted a sentarse haré uso de mi autoridad.

—Hágalo; este proceso es una farsa, yo me marcho —hizo entrega de sus papeles a Amritrao y salió, no sin antes exclamar desde la puerta, de manera teatral pero llena de intensa pasión—: Aziz, Aziz, adiós para siempre.

El tumulto creció, siguió invocándose el nombre de Mrs. Moore, y las personas que ignoraban el significado de aquellas sílabas las repetían como si se tratara de un encantamiento. Al indianizarse, el nombre se convirtió en Eximís Esmuí y fue muy pronto recogido por los que esperaban en la calle. Las amenazas y expulsiones del presidente resultaron inútiles. Hasta que la mas? del nombre se agotó por sí misma, sus esfuerzos no sirvieron de nada.

—Totalmente inesperado —señaló Mr. Turton.

Ronny proporcionó la explicación. Antes de embarcarse, su madre había adquirido la costumbre de hablar en sueños de las Colinas de Marabar, especialmente por la tarde, cuando había criados en el porche, y no le cabía duda de que sus incoherentes observaciones sobre Aziz habían sido vendidas a Mahmoud Ali por unos céntimos; era algo que siempre sucedía en el Oriente.

—Estaba convencido de que iban a intentar algo de este tipo. Ingenioso. —Mr. Turton contempló sus bocas desmesuradamente abiertas—. Consiguen excitarse de esa manera con su religión —añadió calmosamente

—. Empiezan y no pueden parar. Lo siento por el bueno de Das; no está consiguiendo un gran éxito, precisamente.

—Mr. Heaslop, es terrible que mezclen así con todo esto a su querida madre —dijo Miss Derek, inclinándose hacia adelante.

—No es más que un truco, pero les ha salido bien. Ahora se entiende por qué tenían a Mahmoud Ali: sólo para que hiciese una escena si se presentaba la ocasión. Es su especialidad.

Pero lo que estaba sucediendo le molestaba más de lo que dejaba traslucir. Era repugnante oír cómo caricaturizaban a su madre, convirtiéndola en Esmiss Esmur, una diosa hindú.

Esmiss Esmur
Esmiss Esmur
Esmiss Esmur
Esmiss Esmur…

—Ronny…

—Sí, querida.

—¿No es todo muy extraño?

—Me temo que te estará resultando muy molesto.

—Nada en absoluto. No me importa lo más mínimo.

—Bueno; eso está bien.

Adela había hablado con más naturalidad que de ordinario como si se sintiera mejor de salud.

—No se preocupen por mí, estoy mucho mejor que antes —dijo inclinándose hacia sus amigos—; no me siento nada mareada todo va a salir perfectamente, y quiero darles las gracias a todos; las gracias; muchas gracias por su amabilidad.

No tuvo más remedio que gritar su gratitud, porque la Esmiss Esmur, aún continuaba.

Repentinamente se detuvo. Fue como si la plegaría escuchada y se hubieran exhibido las reliquias.

—Pido disculpas por mi colega —dijo Mr. Armitrao, para sorpresa de todo el mundo—. Es un amigo íntimo de nuestro cliente y se ha dejado llevar por sus sentimientos.

—Mr. Mahmoud Ali tendrá que disculparse en Presidente del tribunal.

—Exactamente, señor, tiene que hacerlo. Pero acabamos de saber que Mrs. Moore quería hacer importantes revelaciones, y su hijo la ha hecho salir del país a toda prisa antes de que pudiera declarar; esto ha trastornado a Mr. Mahmoud Ali, al producirse después de un intento de intimidar al único testigo europeo que nos queda, Mr. Fielding. Mr. Mahmoud Ali no habría dicho nada si la policía no hubiese intentado presentar a Mrs. Moore de cargo.

Mr. Amritrao volvió a sentarse.

—Se está introduciendo un elemento extraño al caso —dijo el Presidente—. Debo repetir que, como testigo, Mrs. Moore no existe. Ni usted, Mr. Amritrao; ni usted, Mr. McBryde, tienen el menor derecho a utilizar unas hipotéticas declaraciones de-esa señora. Mrs Moore no está aquí, y, por tanto, nada puede decir.

—Bien, retiro mi alusión —dijo el Superintendente con gesto fatigado —. Lo habría hecho hace quince minutos si se me hubiese dado la oportunidad. El testimonio de Mrs. Moore no tiene la menor importancia para mí.

—Yo la he retirado ya por la defensa —dijo Amritrao. Y añadió con el humor característico de su profesión—: Quizás usted pueda persuadir a los caballeros que están fuera para que la retiren también.

Porque en la calle seguían repitiendo el estribillo.

—Mucho me temo que mis poderes no llegan tan lejos —dijo Das, sonriendo.

Así se restableció la paz, y cuando a Adela le llegó el turno de prestar declaración había más tranquilidad en la sala que en ningún otro momento desde el comienzo del juicio. Los expertos no se mostraban sorprendidos. Ya se sabe que el nativo no tiene aguante. Estalla por una insignificancia y no le quedan fuerzas para el momento crítico. Lo que busca es un motivo de

queja, y ya lo había encontrado en el supuesto rapto de una anciana. Ahora se sentiría mucho menos afligido cuando Aziz fuese deportado.

Pero el momento crítico no había llegado aún.

Adela siempre había tenido intención de decir la verdad y nada más que la verdad, pero la tarea de preparar su declaración le había resultado difícil, porque el desastre de la cueva estaba ligado, aunque sólo fuera por un hilo, con otra parte de su vida, el compromiso matrimonial con Ronny. Adela había pensado en el amor momentos antes de entrar en la cueva, e ingenuamente le había preguntado a Aziz su opinión sobre el matrimonio, y la muchacha suponía que su curiosidad había despertado la idea del mal en el joven médico. Contar todo esto le hubiera resultado increíblemente penoso, y era el único episodio que deseaba mantener a oscuras; estaba dispuesta a dar detalles que hubieran angustiado a otras muchachas, pero no se atrevía a mencionar este fallo particular suyo, y temía ser interrogada en público por la posibilidad de que saliera a relucir algo de aquello. Pero dejó de preocuparle tan pronto como se levantó para contestar y oyó el sonido de su propia voz. Una nueva y desconocida sensación la protegía, semejante a una magnífica armadura. No pensaba en lo que había sucedido, ni tampoco hizo el uso habitual de la memoria que se necesita para recordar, sino que regresó a las Colinas de Marabar y hablaba desde ellas con Mr. McBryde a través de una especie de oscuridad. El día fatal se estaba repitiendo en todos sus detalles, pero ahora Adela se hallaba fuera y dentro de él al mismo tiempo y esta doble relación le daba un esplendor indescriptible. ¿Por qué le había parecido «aburrida» la excursión? El sol se alzó de nuevo, la elefanta les aguardaba y los pálidos relieves de la roca se deslizaron a su alrededor para ofrecerle en seguida la primera cueva; Adela entró, y el resplandor de una cerilla se reflejó en sus brillantes paredes: todo muy hermoso y lleno de significado, aunque ella hubiese sido incapaz de ver nada en aquel momento. Se le iban formulando preguntas y Adela encontraba la respuesta exacta para cada una; sí, había reparado en el «Estanque de la Daga», aunque ignoraba su nombre; sí, Mrs. Moore estaba cansada después de la primera cueva, y se sentó a la sombra de una roca de eran tamaño, cerca del barro seco. Suavemente, la voz que le llegaba de lejos seguía adelante,

llevándola por los senderos de la verdad, y el aire producido por el *punkah* que estaba detrás también la empujaba.

El detenido y el guía la llevaron hasta el Kawa Dol sin que nadie más estuviera presente?

—La colina tiene una configuración realmente extraordinaria. Sí. —Al hablar, Adela iba creando el Kawa Dol, veía los nichos por encima de la curva de la roca y sentía la violencia del calor como una bofetada en el rostro. Y hubo algo que le obligó a añadir—: Que yo sepa, nadie más se hallaba presente. Daba la impresión de que estábamos solos.

—Muy bien, hay un saliente a mitad de camino, colina arriba, o quizá más bien una excavación, con cuevas diseminadas cerca del comienzo de un *nullah*.

—Reconozco el sitio del que está usted hablando.

—¿Entró usted sola en una de esas cuevas?

—Así es, efectivamente.

—Y el procesado la siguió.

—Ya es nuestro —gruñó el Mayor.

Adela guardó silencio. El tribunal, el lugar donde le hacían las preguntas, aguardaba su respuesta. Pero ella no podía darla hasta que Aziz ocupara el espacio requerido por la contestación.

—El detenido la siguió, ¿no es eso? —repitió el Superintendente, con el monótono tono de voz que ambos estaban usando; empleaban todo el tiempo palabras convenidas, de manera que aquella parte del proceso no podía depararles ninguna sorpresa.

—¿Me permite medio minuto antes de responder a eso, Mr. McBryde?

—Ciertamente.

La visión de Adela incluía varias cuevas. Se veía a sí misma en una de ellas, pero también estaba fuera, contemplando la entrada, en espera de que Aziz la cruzara. Pero no consiguió localizarlo. Era la duda que le había asaltado con frecuencia, pero sólida y atractiva, como las mismas colinas.

—No estoy… —Las palabras eran más difíciles que la visión—. No estoy completamente segura.

—¿Cómo dice? —preguntó el Superintendente.

—No tengo seguridad…

—Creo que no he oído bien su respuesta. —McBryde parecía ajustado; su boca se cerró bruscamente—. Está usted en el saliente?* como queramos llamarlo, y ha entrado en una cueva. Le estoy sugiriendo que el detenido la siguió.

Adela movió la cabeza.

—Por favor, ¿qué quiere usted decir?

—No —dijo la muchacha con voz apagada y sin inflexiones.

En varios puntos de la sala se oyeron algunos ruidos todavía débiles, pero, con la excepción de Fielding, nadie entendió todavía lo que estaba sucediendo. El Director del Instituto vio que Miss Quested iba a tener un colapso nervioso y que su amigo se había salvado.

—¿Qué es ello, qué es lo que está usted diciendo? Hable más alto, por favor.

El Presidente se inclinó hacia adelante.

—Me temo que he cometido una equivocación.

—¿Qué clase de equivocación?

—El doctor Aziz nunca me siguió al interior de la cueva.

El Superintendente dio un golpe con sus papeles contra la mesa, luego los recogió de nuevo y dijo con gran calma:

—Ahora, Miss Quested, vamos a continuar. Voy a leerle el contenido de la declaración que firmó usted dos horas más tarde en mi bungalow.

—Discúlpeme, Mr. McBryde, pero no puede usted continuar. Voy a hablar yo mismo con la testigo. Y el público guardará silencio. Si continúa hablando, haré desalojar la sala. Miss Quested, diríjase a mí, que soy el Magistrado responsable de este caso, y dese cuenta de la extraordinaria importancia de sus palabras. Recuerde que habla usted bajo juramento, Miss Quested.

—El doctor Aziz nunca…

—Suspendo este proceso por razones médicas —exclamó el Mayor al decirle Turton una frase al oído.

Todos los ingleses se alzaron de sus sillas al mismo tiempo: voluminosas figuras blancas que ocultaban por completo al Presidente, de

corta estatura. También los indios se pusieron en pie, cientos de cosas sucedieron al mismo tiempo, de manera que después cada persona daba una versión diferente de la catástrofe.

—¿Retira usted la acusación? Contésteme —aulló el representante de la justicia.

Algo que Adela no llegó a entender se apoderó de ella, permitiéndole seguir adelante. Aunque la visión se había desvanecido y se hallaba otra vez en un mundo perfectamente insípido, recordaba lo que había aprendido. Expiación y confesión podían esperar.

—Lo retiro todo —dijo la muchacha con tono prosaico y voz muy ciara.

—Es suficiente; siéntese. Mr. McBryde, ¿desea usted continuar después de esto?

El Superintendente contemplaba a su testigo como si fuera una máquina estropeada.

—¿Se ha vuelto loca? —dijo.

—No siga preguntándole; ya no tiene usted derecho a hacerlo.

—Déme tiempo para reconsiderar…

—*Sahib*, tendrá usted que retirar la acusación; esto se está convirtiendo en un escándalo —tronó el Nabab Bahadur desde el fondo de la sala.

—No lo hará —gritó Mrs. Turton, enfrentándose al creciente tumulto—. Llamen a los otros testigos; ninguno de nosotros está a, salvo… —Ronny trató de detenerla y ella le golpeó muy irritada; luego empezó a insultar a Adela a grandes voces.

El Superintendente acudió en ayuda de sus amigos, diciendo con tono displicente a Mr. Das mientras lo hacía:

—De acuerdo, retiro la acusación.

El Presidente se puso en pie, casi destrozado por la tensión había controlado el caso; nada más, prácticamente, pero demostraba con ello que un indio era capaz de presidir.

—El detenido queda en libertad con todos los pronunciamiento» favorables; la cuestión de las costas se dilucidará en otro momento-dijo a los que aún estaban en condiciones de oírle.

A continuación el frágil entramado de la Administración de la justicia se desplomó, los gritos de burla y de rabia alcanzaron su punto culminante, la gente aulló y maldijo, se besaron unos a otros y lloraron sin tratar de ocultar sus lágrimas. Aquí estaban los ingleses, protegidos por sus criados; allí Aziz, desmayándose en brazos de Hamiaullah. Victoria en este lado; derrota en aquél: durante un: momento la antítesis fue completa. Luego la vida volvió a sus complejidades; una tras otra, todas las personas se abrieron paso hasta salir del juzgado camino de sus diferentes tareas, y antes de que pasara mucho tiempo no quedaba en la escena de aquel ensueño más que el hermoso dios desnudo. Sin darse cuenta de que hubiera sucedido nada anormal, seguía tirando de la cuerda de su *punkah*, *con*templando el estrado vacío y las sillas especiales, caídas en su mayor parte, mientras agitaba con ritmo imperturbable las nubes de polvo descendente.

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Capitulo vigésimo quinto

Miss Quested había negado a los suyos. Al alejarse de ellos se vio envuelta por una masa de indios de la clase dedicada al pequeño comercio y arrastrada hacia la salida pública del juzgado. El tenue e indescriptible olor de los bazares la invadió, más agradable que el de un suburbio londinense, pero también más inquietante; un poco de algodón en rama perfumado, sujeto tras la oreja de un anciano, fragmentos de pan entre sus dientes negros, polvos olorosos, aceites: el Oriente aromático de la tradición, pero mezclado con sudor, como si un gran rey se hubiera visto envuelto en algo vergonzoso y no pudiera recobrar la libertad, o como si el calor de! sol hubiera cocido y frito todas las glorias de la tierra en revuelta confusión. Los indios no hicieron el menor caso de Adela. Se estrecharon la mano unos a otros por encima de su hombro, gritaron $ través de su cuerpo… porque cuando el indio ignora de verdad a sus gobernantes llega a olvidarse por completo de su existencia. Privada de toda participación en el universo que había creado, Adela se tropezó de pronto con Mr. Fielding.

—¿Qué busca usted aquí?

Sabiéndole enemigo suyo, Adela se dirigió hacia la calle sin contestar.

—¿Dónde va usted, Miss Quested? —la llamó él desde detrás.

—No lo sé.

—No puede usted salir por ahí de esa manera. ¿Dónde está el coche en el que vino?

—Volveré andando.

—Qué locura… Parece que hay un motín en marcha… La policía ha atacado, nadie sabe lo que ocurrirá después. ¿Por qué no vuelve usted con su gente?

—¿Debería reunirme con ellos? —dijo Adela, sin manifestar la menor emoción.

Se sentía vacía, sin valor alguno; no había ya ni sombra de virtud en ella.

—No puede, es demasiado tarde. No hay manera de llegar a la otra entrada. Venga por aquí conmigo, de prisa; haré que la lleven en mi coche.

—Cyril, Cyril, no me dejes —llamó Aziz, con voz insegura.

—Vuelvo en seguida… Por aquí, y no discuta. —Fielding agarró a Adela del brazo—. Perdone mis modales, pero es que no conozco la posición de nadie. Devuélvame el coche mañana a cualquier hora, si hace el favor.

—Pero ¿adónde voy a ir con él?

—Donde prefiera. ¿Cómo quiere que yo lo sepa?

La victoria del Director del Instituto estaba a salvo en un tranquilo callejón lateral, pero faltaban los caballos, porque el *sais*, pensando que el proceso no terminaría de forma tan abrupta, se había ido con ellos a visitar a un amigo. Adela se subió al coche obedientemente. Fielding no podía dejarla, porque la confusión iba en aumento, y en algunos puntos tomaba un cariz muy fanático. La calle principal que atravesaba los bazares estaba cortada y los ingleses regresaban a la zona residencial por caminos poco frecuentados; eran como moscas cogidas en una tela de araña y no hubiera sido difícil acabar con ellos.

—¿Qué…, qué ha estado usted haciendo? —exclamo Fielding de repente—. ¿Jugando, estudiando la vida, o qué?

—Esto es para usted, señor —interrumpió un estudiante, acudiendo callejón abajo con una guirnalda de jazmines en el brazo.

—No quiero esa porquería; sal de aquí.

—Soy un caballo, señor; seremos sus caballos exclamo otro. mientras alzaba las lanzas de la victoria.

—Trae a mi *sais*, Rafi; pórtate como un buen muchacho.

—No, señor; llevarles es un honor para nosotros.

Fielding estaba cansado de sus alumnos. Cuanto mas le honraban, menos le obedecían. Le pusieron jazmines y rosas alrededor del cuello, arañaron el guardabarros contra una pared y recitaron un poema; el ruido hizo que el callejón se llenara de gente.

—Démonos prisa, señor; vamos a llevarle con la comitiva.

Y con una mezcla de afecto y descaro le rodearon por todas partes.

—No sé si esto le parecerá bien, pero en cualquier salvo —le explicó a Adela.

El coche llegó a tirones hasta el bazar más importante, donde produjo cierta sensación. A Miss Quested se la odiaba tanto en Chandrapore que no se daba crédito a su retracción y corría el rumor de que la deidad la había fulminado en medio de sus mentiras. Pero todo el mundo aplaudió cuando la vieron sentada junto a heroico Director del Instituto (¡algunos la llamaban Mrs Moore), y le pusieron guirnaldas para igualarla personas, con flores alrededor del cuello, en seguimiento del victorioso lando de Aziz. En que se les recibía iba mezclada cierta burla. ¡Los ingleses siempre siguen unidos! Tal era la crítica que se les hacia. Y no era del todo injusta. Fielding estaba de acuerdo, y sabía que, de producirse algún malentendido, si sus aliados llegaban a atacar a la muchacha se vería obligado a morir en su defensa. Y el Director del Instituto no deseaba en absoluto morir por ella; lo que quería era participar en el regocijo de Aziz.

¿Adónde se dirigía la comitiva? En busca de amigos y enemigos, al bungalow de Aziz, al del Administrador General, al Hospital Minto, donde el Cirujano-Jefe tendría que humillarse y los pacientes (confundiéndolos con reclusos) serían puestos en libertad; y también a Delhi y a Simla[14]. Los estudiantes creyeron que iba al Instituto. Cuando llegaron a un cruce, torcieron hacia la derecha, y por calles laterales llevaron el carruaje colina abajo hasta atravesar la puerta de un jardín y penetrar en una plantación de mangos donde, por lo que se refiere a Fielding y a Miss Quested, todo era

paz y silencio. Los árboles estaban llenos de lustroso follaje y de pequeños frutos verdes; el estanque dormitaba y tras él se alzaban los exquisitos arcos azules del pabellón.

—Señor, vamos a buscar a otros; el coche es una carga algo pesada para nuestros brazos —oyeron decir a los estudiantes.

Fielding se refugió en su despacho y trató de telefonear a McBryde, pero no le fue posible; los hilos estaban cortados. Todos sus criados habían desaparecido. Una vez más el Director del Instituto se sintió incapaz de abandonar a Miss Quested. Le asignó un par de habitaciones, le proporcionó hielo, bebidas y galletas, le aconsejó que se echara y también él fue a tumbarse, porque no había otra cosa que hacer. Fielding se sentía inquieto y frustrado escuchando los sonidos de la comitiva que se alejaba, y la perplejidad le impedía disfrutar del triunfo. Habían vencido, pero la victoria resultaba muy extraña.

—Cyril, Cyril… —gritaba Aziz en aquel momento.

Apretujado en un vehículo con el Nabab Bahadur, Hamidullah, Mahmoud Ali, sus hijos y un montón de flores, no se sentía satisfecho; quería estar rodeado por todos los que le amaban. La victoria no le proporcionaba ningún placer; había sufrido demasiado. Desde el momento de su detención se consideró perdido, derrumbándose como un animal herido; había perdido la esperanza, no por cobardía, sino por saber que la palabra de una inglesa siempre tendría más peso que la suya. «Es el destino», había dicho; y «es el destino», repitió cuando volvieron a encarcelarlo después de *muharram. Lo* único que quedaba, durante aquellas terribles semanas, era el afecto; y afecto era todo lo que sentía en los primeros momentos dolorosos de su libertad.

—¿Por qué no viene Cyril detrás? Demos la vuelta.

Pero la comitiva no podía volver atrás. Avanzaba por el estrecho paso dentro del bazar, camino de la depresión donde estaba el Maidan, como una serpiente por una tubería; en la explanada podría girar sobre sí misma y decidir cuál habría de ser su presa.

—Adelante, adelante —gritó Mahmoud Ali, que hablaba únicamente lanzando alaridos—. Abajo el Administrador, abajo el Superintendente de la

policía.

—Mr. Mahmoud Ali, eso no es prudente —imploró el Nabad Bahadur.

Sabía que no se ganaba nada atacando a los ingleses; habían caído en su propia trampa y más valía dejarlos allí; él, además, tenía grandes posesiones y condenaba la anarquía.

—Cyril, me abandonas de nuevo —exclamó Aziz.

—Sin embargo, hace falta una demostración ordenada —dijo Hamidullah—; de lo contrario seguirán pensando que tenemos miedo.

—Abajo el Cirujano-Jefe…, rescatemos a Nureddin.

—¿Nureddin?

—Lo están torturando.

—Dios mío… —dijo Aziz, porque también era un amigo.

—No es cierto. No permitiré que se tome a mi nieto como excusa para un ataque al hospital —protestó el anciano.

—Sí que lo es. Callendar alardeó de ello antes del juicio. Lo oí a través de los *tattis*. Dijo: «He torturado a ese sucio negro.»

—Dios mío, Dios mío… Le llamó sucio negro, ¿no es cierto?

—Le pusieron pimienta en las heridas, en lugar de antiséptico.

—Mr. Mahmoud Ali, eso es imposible; de todas formas un poco de mano dura no le vendrá mal a ese muchacho, necesita disciplina.

—Pimienta. Lo dijo el Cirujano-Jefe. Confían en destruirnos uno a uno; pero no lo conseguirán.

La nueva injuria enfureció a la multitud. Hasta entonces le había faltado objetivo; carecía de agravio que vengar. Cuando llegaron al Maidan y vieron las amarillentas arcadas del Minto, se dirigieron aullando hacia él. Era casi mediodía. La fealdad de cielo y tierra era increíble; el espíritu del mal campaba de nuevo por sus respetos. Tan sólo el Nabab Bahadur luchaba contra él y se decía a sí mismo que el rumor debía de ser falso. Había visto a su nieto en el hospital! la semana anterior. Pero también él se vio arrastrado hasta caer por el nuevo precipicio. Había que rescatar a los enfermos y maltratar al Mayor Callendar como venganza; luego le llegaría el turnó a toda la zona residencial de los ingleses.

Pero el desastre se evitó, y fue el doctor Panna Lal quien lo hizo.

El doctor Panna Lal se había prestado a declarar como testigo de cargo con la esperanza de agradar a los ingleses, pero también porque odiaba a Aziz. Cuando la acusación se vino abajo se encontró en una posición muy penosa, pero como comprendió lo que estaba sucediendo más de prisa que la mayoría de la gente se escabulló del juzgado antes de que Mr. Das terminara y atravesó los bazares con Dapple a buen paso, huyendo sin rebozo de la indignación que más pronto o más tarde, acabaría por estallar. En el hospital estaría a salvo, porque el Mayor Callendar le protegería. Pero el Mayor no había aparecido y ahora las cosas estaban peor que nunca, porque llegaba un tropel de gente clamando por su sangre, y los enfermeros se habían amotinado y no le ayudaban a saltar la valla de atrás, o más bien le alzaban para dejarle después caer, con gran satisfacción de los pacientes.

—El nombre no puede morir más que una vez —exclamó finalmente el doctor Lal lleno de angustia, y se dispuso a cruzar el recinto del hospital para hacer frente a la invasión, saludando con una mano y empuñando en la otra un paraguas de color amarillo claro.

—¡Perdóneme! —gimió al acercarse al victorioso landó—. Doctor Aziz, perdóneme todas las mentiras que he dicho.

Aziz guardó silencio, los otros hincharon el cuello y sacaron la barbilla en prueba de desprecio.

—Tenía miedo, me dejé engañar —continuó Panna Lal con tono suplicante—. Me dejé engañar en todo lo relativo a su carácter. ¡Perdone al pobre y anciano *hakim* que le dio leche cuando estaba enfermo! ¡Nabab Bahadur, siempre compasivo! ¿Es mi pobre dispensario lo que desean? Llévense todos esos malditos frascos.

Muy nervioso, pero atento a los gestos de sus oyentes, Panna Lal les vio sonreír ante su inglés, y repentinamente empezó a hacer el bufón: tiró la sombrilla, la pisoteó y se golpeó él mismo en la nariz. Sabía lo que estaba haciendo, y sus espectadores también. No había nada patético ni sublime en el envilecimiento de un hombre como él. De origen innoble, el doctor Panna Lal no poseía nada que pudiera degradarse, y con gran prudencia decidió lograr que los otros indios se sintieran como reyes, porque eso les pondría de mejor humor. Cuando descubrió que querían a Nureddin, brincó

como una cabra y corrió como una gallina para hacer lo que le pedían; el hospital se salvó, y hasta el fin de su vida no comprendió por qué no le habían ascendido por el trabajo de aquella mañana. «Prontitud, señor; prontitud similar a la suya», era el argumento que utilizaba ante el Mayor Callendar para reclamar un puesto más elevado.

Al aparecer Nureddin con el rostro cubierto de vendajes, se oyó un rugido de alivio, como si hubiese caído la Bastilla. Era el momento crítico de la marcha, y el Nabab Bahadur logró hacerse con la situación. Después de abrazar al joven en público, inició un discurso sobre Justicia, Valor, Libertad y Prudencia —ordenando el tema en varios apartados—, que logró enfriar las pasiones de la multitud. Explicó además que iba a renunciar al título que le habían otorgado los ingleses, para volver a la vida privada como Mr. Zuifiqar, y que por esa razón se pondría inmediatamente en camino hacia su casa en el campo. El landó se dio la vuelta, la multitud lo acompañó y la crisis quedó atrás. Las Cuevas de Marabar habían supuesto un desgaste terrible para el Gobierno local; habían alterado un buen número de vidas y destrozado varias carreras, pero no habían dividido un continente, ni tal siquiera dislocado un distrito.

—Lo celebraremos esta noche —dijo el anciano—. Mr. Hamidullah, delego en usted para que traiga a nuestros amigos Fielding y Amritrao y se informe de si este último necesitará alimentos especiales. Los demás se quedarán conmigo. No saldremos hacía Dilkusha hasta que refresque a última hora de la tarde, por supuesto. Ignoro cómo se sienten los otros caballeros, pero a mí me duele un poco la cabeza, y lamento no haberme acordado de pedirle una aspirina a nuestro buen Panna Lal.

Porque el calor estaba reclamando lo que era suyo. Incapaz de enfurecer, atontaba, y antes de que pasara mucho tiempo todos los combatientes de Chandrapore estaban dormidos. Los que se habían refugiado en la zona residencial mantuvieron la vigilancia durante un rato, temiendo un ataque, pero también ellos se adentraron en seguida en el mundo de los sueños: ese mundo en el que todos los hombres pasan un tercio de su vida y que algunos pesimistas consideran como un anticipo de la eternidad.

Capítulo vigésimo sexto

Empezaba a atardecer cuando Fielding y Miss Quested se reunieron y tuvieron la primera de sus numerosas y peculiares conversaciones. El Director del Instituto había albergado la esperanza de que cuando se levantara descubriría que alguien se la había llevado, pero el recinto del centro docente seguía aislado del resto del universo. Adela le preguntó si podían celebrar «una especie de entrevista», y al no obtener respuesta, dijo:

—¿Ha encontrado usted alguna explicación a mi extraño comportamiento?

—Ninguna —respondió él lacónicamente—. ¿Por qué hacer semejante acusación si después iba usted a retirarla?

—Efectivamente, ¿por qué?

—Supongo que debería sentirme agradecido, pero…

—No espero gratitud. Tan sólo pensé que quizá le interesara oír lo que tengo que decir.

—Bueno —refunfuñó Fielding, sintiéndose bastante poco seguro de sí mismo—. No creo que sea muy deseable una discusión entre nosotros. Para decirlo sin rodeos, yo pertenezco al otro bando en este desagradable asunto.

—¿No le interesaría oír mi versión?

—No mucho.

—Por supuesto, no pretendo hablarle de manera confidencial, así que podría usted transmitir todas mis observaciones a sus amigos, porque de todos los sufrimientos de hoy ha salido al menos una cosa positiva: ya no tengo ningún secreto. Mi eco ha desaparecido; llamo eco a un zumbido que tenía en los oídos. La verdad es que he estado indispuesta desde la expedición a las cuevas, y es posible que incluso desde antes.

Las palabras de Miss Quested interesaron bastante a Fielding; era lo mismo que él había sospechado a veces.

—¿Qué clase de indisposición? —quiso saber.

Adela se tocó un lado de la cabeza y luego la agitó.

—Eso fue lo primero que pensé el día que detuvieron a Aziz: una alucinación.

—¿Cree usted que podría ser eso? —preguntó ella con gran humildad —. ¿Cuál sería la causa de esa alucinación?

—En las Colinas de Marabar sólo pudo suceder una de estas tres cosas —dijo Fielding, dejándose arrastar a una discusión en contra de sus deseos —. Bueno, quizá sean cuatro posibilidades. O Aziz es culpable, que es lo que creen sus amigos, o usted inventó la acusación por pura malicia, que es lo que piensan los míos; o sufrió usted una alucinación. Yo me siento muy inclinado —levantándose y paseando por la habitación—, ahora que usted me dice que se sentía indispuesta antes de la excursión (es un dato muy importante), a creer que fue usted misma quien rompió la correa de los prismáticos, que estuvo usted sola en la cueva todo el tiempo. —Quizá…

—¿Recuerda cuándo empezó a sentirse mal?

—Cuando vine a tomar el té con usted, en el pabellón.

—Una reunión bastante desafortunada. Aziz y el profesor Godbole también enfermaron después.

—Yo no estaba enferma…, es una cosa demasiado vaga para poder explicarla con claridad; se halla todo muy mezclado con mili asuntos privados. Me gustó mucho el canto del profesor Godbole…; pero, más o menos, entonces empecé a sentir una especie de tristeza que no fui capaz de detectar en aquel momento…, no, era algo menos concreto que la tristeza: vivir a mitad de presión quizá lo exprese mejor. Como sin interés por nada.

Recuerdo haber ido a ver el partido de polo en el Maidan con Mr. Heaslop. Sucedieron varias cosas más, no importa lo que fuera; lo cierto es que estuve todo el tiempo por debajo de mis posibilidades. duda, seguía en ese mismo estado cuando vi las cuevas, y usted sugiere (ya no hay nada que me asuste ni que me hiera)…, usted sugiere que sufrí una alucinación, el tipo de experiencia (aunque mucho más terrible en este caso) que hace pensar a algunas mujeres que se les ha hecho una proposición matrimonial, cuando «V» realidad no ha sido así.

—En cualquier caso, lo presenta usted de una manera muy sincera.

—Me educaron para que fuese sincera; el problema es que no me sirve de nada.

Aquello hizo que Fielding la mirara con más simpatía.

—Servirá para llevarnos al cielo.

—¿Cree usted?

—Si es que existe el cielo.

—¿Puedo preguntarle si cree usted en el cielo, Mr. Fielding? —dijo ella, mirándole tímidamente.

—No. Pero creo que la sinceridad nos lleva allí.

—¿Cómo puede ser eso?

—Volvamos a las alucinaciones. La he estado observando con mucha atención mientras prestaba declaración esta mañana, y si no estoy equivocado, la alucinación (lo que usted llama vivir a mitad de presión, que viene a ser lo mismo) desapareció de repente.

Adela trató de recordar lo que había sentido en el juzgado, pero no pudo; la visión desaparecía cada vez que deseaba interpretarla.

—Los acontecimientos se me fueron presentando en su orden lógico —fue lo que dijo, pero no había sido así en absoluto.

—Mi opinión, y, naturalmente, la estaba escuchando sin perder palabra, con la esperanza de que cometiera usted algún error, mi opinión, como digo, es que el pobre McBryde actuó de exorcista. En cuanto le hizo una pregunta directa, usted respondió con toda sinceridad y se vino abajo.

—¿Habla de exorcizar en ese sentido? Creía que se refería usted a que yo había visto un fantasma.

—¡No voy tan lejos!

—Personas por las que siento un gran respeto creen en los fantasmas —dijo ella con tono más bien cortante—. Mi amiga Mrs. Moore, por ejemplo.

—Mrs. Moore es una anciana.

—No creo que necesite ser descortés con ella como ya lo fue con su hijo.

—No era mi intención mostrarme grosero. Sólo quería decir que, a medida que pasan los años, resulta más difícil resistirse a lo sobrenatural. He comprobado que está empezando a sucederme a mí mismo. Todavía sigo adelante sin hacer caso; pero qué tentación, cuando ya se tienen cuarenta y cinco años, fingir que los muertos vuelven a vivir; los muertos de uno; los demás no importan.

—Porque los muertos no vuelven a vivir.

—Mucho me temo que no.

—Yo también.

Hubo un momento de silencio, como sucede a menudo después de un triunfo del racionalismo. Luego Fielding se disculpó generosamente por su comportamiento con Heaslop en el club.

—¿Qué dice de mí el doctor Aziz? —preguntó Adela después de otra pausa.

—Ha…, ha sufrido demasiado para pensar con calma y, como es lógico, está muy amargado —dijo Fielding, un poco torpemente, porque los comentarios de Aziz eran groseros además de amargos. La idea subyacente era: «Lo que me deshonra es que se haya mezclado mi nombre con el de esa bruja.» Le enfurecía verse acusado por una mujer sin atractivo físico; sexualmente Aziz era un esnob. Esto había sorprendido y preocupado a Fielding. La sensualidad, mientras fuese directa, no fe repelía, pero aquella sensualidad derivada —del tipo que clasifica a las amantes entre los automóviles si son hermosas y entre los mosquitos si no lo son— le resultaba totalmente ajena a sus propias emociones, y se le presentaba como una barrera entre Aziz y él cada vez que salía a relucir. Era, de una forma nueva, el viejo problema que devora el corazón de todas las civilizaciones: el esnobismo, el deseo de tener posesiones, apéndices que aumenten el

propio crédito; y los santos se retiran al Himalaya más para huir de esto que para escapar a las inclinaciones de la carne—, Pero permítame que termine mi análisis —dijo, para cambiar de tema—. Sabemos que Aziz no es el culpable, ni usted tampoco, y no estamos seguros de que sea una alucinación. Queda una cuarta posibilidad que también debemos examinar: ¿pudo ser alguna otra persona?

—El guía.

—Exactamente, el guía. Lo he pensado a menudo. Desgraciadamente, Aziz le dio una bofetada, y el otro se asustó y desapareció. Como ve, una situación muy poco satisfactoria, pero tampoco hemos contado con la ayuda de la policía, porque el guía carecía de interés para ellos.

—Quizá fuera el guía —dijo Adela con tono sosegado; de repente el problema había dejado de interesarle.

—¿O podría haber sido uno de ese grupo de *pathans* que han estado vagabundeando por el distrito?

—¿Había alguien en otra cueva y me siguió cuando el guía no miraba? Es posible.

En aquel momento Hamidullah se reunió con ellos, y no pareció muy complacido por el hecho de encontrarlos juntos. Al igual que todos los habitantes de Chandrapore, encontraba inexplicable la conducta de Miss Quested, y al entrar había oído las últimas frase*.

—¿Qué tal, mi querido Fielding? —dijo—. Por fin consigo atraparlo. ¿Puede venir conmigo a Dilkusha inmediatamente?

—¿Inmediatamente?

—Espero marcharme en seguida, no quiero causarle molestias —dijo Adela.

—El teléfono está cortado; Miss Quested no puede llamar a sus amigos —explicó Fielding.

—Muchas cosas han quedado cortadas; más de las que nadie podrá arreglar jamás —replicó el otro—. De todas maneras, debería haber alguna forma de trasladar a esta señora a la zona inglesa. Los recursos de la civilización son muy amplios.

Hamidullah hablaba sin mirar a Adela e ignoró el débil movimiento que ella inició para estrecharle la mano.

—Miss Quested estaba tratando de explicarme su conducta de esta mañana —dijo Fielding, con la idea de que aquella conversación estuviera presidida por un ambiente de cordialidad.

—Quizás hayamos vuelto a la época de los milagros. Hay que estar preparados para todo, dicen nuestros filósofos.

—Quizá les haya parecido un milagro a los espectadores —dijo Adela, dirigiéndose a él con mucho nerviosismo—. El hecho es que me di cuanta antes de que fuese demasiado tarde de que había cometido una equivocación, y tuve la suficiente presencia de ánimo para decirlo así. A eso queda reducido mi extraño comportamiento.

—A eso queda reducido, sin duda —replicó Hamidullah, temblando de rabia, pero sin perder el control, porque temía que la muchacha estuviera tendiéndole otra trampa—. Hablando a título personal, en conversación puramente amistosa, tengo que admirar su conducta, y me agradó que nuestros simpáticos estudiantes la engalanaran con guirnaldas. Pero, al igual que Mr. Fielding, estoy sorprendido; diría incluso que sorpresa es una palabra demasiado débil. Veo cómo arrastra usted a mi mejor amigo por el fango, echa a perder su salud y destroza su futuro de una forma que usted no puede concebir, decido a su ignorancia de nuestra sociedad y de nuestra religión, para luego, de repente, levantarse en el estrado de los testigos y decir: «No, Mr. McBryde, en realidad no estoy del todo segura, será mejor que lo deje usted marchar.» ¿Me habré vuelto loco? Me pregunto una y otra vez. ¿Se trata de un sueño?, y si es así, ¿cuándo empezó? Sin duda se trata de un sueño que aún continúa; porque, según deduzco, todavía no han terminado ustedes con nosotros y ahora le toca el turno al pobre guía que fue mostrándole las cuevas.

—Nada de eso, no hacíamos más que reparar posibilidades —intervino Fielding.

—Un pasatiempo interesante, pero que requerirá mucho tiempo. Hay ciento setenta millones de indios en esta notable península, y, por supuesto, alguno de ellos entró en la cueva. Un indio tiene que ser el culpable, por

supuesto; nunca debemos ponerlo en duda. Pero ya que, mi querido Fielding, esas posibilidades tardarán en concretarse —al llegar aquí Hamidullah pasó el brazo por encima del hombro del inglés y lo zarandeó suavemente—, ¿no sería mejor que viniera usted a casa del Nabab Bahadur, o debiera decir más bien de Mr. Zulfiqar, porque ése es el nombre con que ahora quiere que lo llamemos?

—Con mucho gusto, dentro de un momento…

—Ya he decidido lo que voy a hacer —dijo Miss Quested—. Me iré al *Dak Bungalow*.

—¿No volverá a casa de los Turton? —preguntó Hamidullah con ojos desorbitados—. Creía que era usted su huésped.

El *Dak Bungalow* de Chandrapore estaba en peores condiciones que la mayoría, y con toda seguridad carecía de criados. Fielding, aunque seguía dejándose mecer por Hamidullah, estaba pensando por su cuenta, y dijo al cabo de un momento:

—Tengo una idea mejor, Miss Quested. Debe usted quedarse aquí en el Instituto. Yo estaré ausente dos días por lo menos; tendrá usted todo el recinto a su disposición y podrá hacer sus planes como mejor le convenga.

—No estoy de acuerdo en absoluto —dijo Hamidullah, con palpable consternación—. Se trata de una pésima idea. Esta noche podría perfectamente producirse otra demostración y supongamos que alguien atacara el Instituto. Se haría usted responsable de la seguridad de esta señora, mi querido amigo.

—También podrían atacar el *Dak Bungalow*.

—De acuerdo, pero en este caso la responsabilidad ceta de ser suya.

—Así es. Yo ha he causado suficientes problemas.

—¿Lo oye? La señora misma lo admite. No es un ataque de nuestra gente lo que yo temo: tendría usted que haber visto su comportamiento en el hospital; hay que estar preparados contra una incursión preparada en secreto por la policía con el fin de desacreditarle a usted. McBryde mantiene a un buen grupo de rufianes con ese fin y sería darle la oportunidad que ha estado esperando.

—No importa. Miss Quested no irá al *Dak Bungalow* —dijo Fielding, que simpatizaba espontáneamente con los oprimidos fea parte era ésa la razón de que hubiese apoyado a Aziz) y había decidido no dejar a la pobre muchacha en la estacada.

Además, después de su conversación sentía por ella un respeto que antes no le inspiraba.

Aunque Adela seguía manteniendo su fría actitud de maestra, ya no era ella quien examinaba la vida, sino que la vida la examinaba a ella; Miss Quested se había convertido en un verdadero ser mano.

—Entonces, ¿dónde va a ir? ¡Nunca nos libraremos de su presencia!

Porque la muchacha no había despertado la simpatía de Hamidullah. Si se hubiera emocionado en la sala del tribunal; si se hubiese derrumbado, dándose golpes de pecho e invocando el nombre de Dios, habría logrado atraer la imaginación y la generosidad de Hamidullah, que poseía ambas cosas en abundancia.

Pero Adela había conseguido helar la mente oriental al mismo tiempo que le quitaba un gran peso de encima y el resultado era que Hamidullah difícilmente podía creer que fuese sincera, y, en realidad, desde su punto de vista no lo era. Porque su comportamiento descansaba sobre la sinceridad y la justicia entendidas de la forma más fría imaginable; al retractarse, Miss Quested no había sentido amor por aquellos a quienes había perjudicado. La verdad no es verdad en esa tierra tan exigente a no ser que vaya unida a la amabilidad, seguida de más amabilidad y luego otra vez de más amabilidad aún; a no ser que la Palabra que estaba en Dios también sea Dios[15]. Y el sacrificio de la muchacha —tan meritorio según las ideas occidentales— era rechazado con toda justicia porque, aunque venia de su corazón, no lo incluía.

Unas cuantas guirnaldas, colocadas por los estudiantes alrededor de su cuello, era todo lo que la India iba a darle como recompensa.

—¿Que dónde va a cenar y dónde va a dormir? Yo digo que aquí, aquí mismo; y si unos rufianes le golpean la cabeza, se la habrán golpeado. Ésa es mi contribución. ¿Qué dice usted, Miss Quested?

—Es usted muy amable. Creo que hubiera dicho que sí, pero estoy de acuerdo con Mr. Hamidullah. No debo causarle a usted más problemas. Me parece que lo mejor será volver con los Turton y ver si me permiten dormir allí; si me echan tendré que ir al Dak. El Administrador me aceptaría, estoy segura, pero Mrs. Turton ha dicho esta mañana que no quería volver a verme.

Adela hablaba sin amargura, o, como pensó Hamidullah, sin el debido amor propio. Lo que ella se proponía era causar las menores molestias posibles.

—Será mejor que se quede aquí en lugar de exponerse a los insultos de esa absurda mujer.

—¿La encuentra usted absurda? A mí solía parecérmelo. Ahora ya no.

—Bien, aquí está nuestra solución —dijo el abogado, que después de terminar el suave zarandeo conminatorio de Fielding se había llegado hasta la ventana—. Se acerca el Magistrado Municipal. Viene sin criados y en un *bandghari* de tercera categoría para pasar inadvertido, pero viene.

—Por fin —dijo Adela con una acritud que hizo volverse a Fielding para mirarla.

—Ya viene, ya viene. Me encojo. Tiemblo.

—¿Hará el favor de preguntarle lo que quiere, Mr. Fielding?

—Viene en busca suya, por supuesto.

—Quizá ni siquiera sepa que estoy aquí.

—Le veré yo primero, si usted lo prefiere.

Cuando Fielding se hubo marchado, Hamidullah dijo con tono mordaz:

—Vamos, vamos. ¿Era preciso exponer a Mr. Fielding a esta nueva molestia? Es un hombre demasiado considerado.

Adela no respondió y ninguno de los dos dijo nada hasta que regresó el dueño de la casa.

—Míster Heaslop tiene noticias para usted —dijo Fielding—. Lo encontrará en el porche. Prefiere no entrar.

—¿Ha dicho que salga yo a verle?

—Lo haya dicho o no, creo que tendrá usted que ir —dijo Hamidullah.

Adela hizo una pausa y luego respondió:

—Tiene usted toda la razón.

Después añadió unas palabras de agradecimiento al Director del Instituto por su amabilidad durante el día.

—Menos mal que esto ha terminado —dijo Fielding, sin acompañar a la muchacha hasta el porche, juzgando innecesario ver a Ronny de nuevo.

—Es insultante que Mr. Heaslop no haya entrado en la casa.

—No podía hacerlo después de mi comportamiento con él en el Club. Heaslop no sale demasiado malparado de todo este asunto. Además, el destino le ha tratado hoy con mano dura. Ha recibido un telegrama comunicándole la muerte de su madre, pobre señora.

—Ah, Mrs. Moore. Lo siento —dijo Hamidullah con voz más bien indiferente.

—Murió en el barco.

—El calor, imagino.

—Es probable.

—Mayo no es un mes adecuado para que una anciana salga de viaje.

—Efectivamente. Heaslop no debiera haberla dejado marchar, y él lo sabe. ¿Nos ponemos en camino?

—Vamos a esperar a que la feliz pareja abandone el recinto…, es realmente intolerable que sigan ahí perdiendo el tiempo. Ya sé que usted no cree en la providencia, pero yo sí. Esto ha sido el castigo de Heaslop por quitarnos un testigo y evitar así que tuviéramos una buena coartada.

—Me parece que en eso va usted demasiado lejos. El testimonio de la pobre señora no hubiese servido de nada, por muchos gritos que diera Mahmoud Ali. Mrs. Moore no habría podido ver lo que pasaba dentro del Kawa Dol aunque hubiera querido. Sólo Miss Quested podía salvar a Aziz.

—Mrs. Moore quería a Aziz, según dice él mismo, y también a la India, y él la quería a ella.

—El cariño no tiene ningún valor en un testigo, como todo abogado debe saber. Pero soy consciente de que va a crearse una leyenda de Esmiss Esmur en Chandrapore, y no seré yo quien se oponga a su desarrollo.

El otro sonrió y miró la hora en su reloj. Los dos lamentaban la muerte de la anciana, pero eran hombres maduros que habían orientado sus

emociones en otra dirección y en su caso no cabía esperar explosiones de dolor por una persona a quien apenas conocían. Sólo los muertos propios son importantes. Si por un momento tuvieron el sentimiento de la comunión en el dolor fue para perderlo en seguida. ¿Cómo sería posible que un ser humano te compadeciera de toda la tristeza que se le aparece sobre la faz de la tierra, de todo el sufrimiento que padecen no sólo los hombres, sino los animales y las plantas, y quizás incluso las piedras? £1 alma se fatiga en seguida, y por temor a perder lo poco que de verdad entiende, se retira a las posiciones permanentes establecidas por la costumbre o la casualidad y sufre allí. Fielding únicamente había visto a la muerta dos o tres veces, Hamidullah sólo una y desde lejos, y los dos estaban mucho más preocupados con la inminente reunión en Dilkusha; con aquella cena de la «victoria» a la que iban a llegar victoriosamente tarde. Se pusieron de acuerdo en no hablar a Aziz de Mrs. Moore hasta la mañana siguiente, porque la quería mucho y las malas noticias podían estropearle la fiesta.

—¡Esto es insoportable! —murmuró Hamidullah, porque Miss Quested había vuelto.

—Mr. Fielding, ¿le ha hablado Ronny de esta nueva desgracia?

El otro asintió con la cabeza.

—¡Pobre de mí!

Adela se sentó y dio la impresión de transformarse en estatua.

—Creo que Heaslop la está esperando.

—Me gustaría tanto estar sola… Mrs. Moore era mi mejor amiga y significaba mucho más para mí que para él. No soporto estar con Ronny… No puedo explicarlo… ¿Sería usted tan amable de permitir que me quede aquí, después de todo?

Hamiaullah lanzó una maldición en su idioma nativo.

—Lo haré con mucho gusto, pero ¿será también ése el deseo de Mr. Heaslop?

—No se lo he preguntado, estamos demasiado afectados…, es una cosa muy complicada, no se parece a lo que normalmente se entiende por ser desgraciado. Los dos deberíamos quedarnos solos y pensar. Haga el favor de hablar otra vez con Ronny.

—Creo que esta vez debería entrar él —dijo Fielding, consciente de que su propia dignidad reclamaba al menos eso—. Óigale que pase.

Adela regresó con él. Heaslop parecía hundido y arrogante al mismo tiempo —una mezcla realmente extraña—, y empezó a hablar inmediatamente de manera entrecortada:

—He venido a llevarme a Miss Quested, pero su estancia en casa de los Turton ha terminado, y de momento no ha surgido ningún otro acomodo; mi bungalow es ahora una casa de soltero…

Fielding le interrumpió cortésmente.

—No siga; Miss Quested se queda aquí. Sólo deseaba estar seguro de su aprobación. Miss Quested, será mejor que mande usted a por su criado si es posible encontrarlo, yo daré órdenes a los míos para que hagan todo lo posible por usted; también se lo haré saber a los Exploradores: se han encargado de custodiar el Instituto desde que se cerró y pueden muy bien seguir haciéndolo. Creo que esta usted tan segura aquí como en cualquier otro sitio. Yo volveré el jueves.

Mientras tanto Hamidullah, decidido a no ahorrarle al enemigo ningún sufrimiento por insignificante que fuera, le había dicho a Ronny:

—Hemos oído que ha muerto su madre. ¿Podemos preguntarle de dónde procedía el telegrama?

—Aden.

—Sin embargo, usted ha presumido durante el juicio de que Mrs. Moore ya había llegado a Aden.

—Ha muerto nada más zarpar el barco de Bombay —intervino Adela—. Ya había muerto cuando hablaron de ella esta mañana. Han debido de arrojar su cuerpo al mar.

Por alguna razón aquello silenció a Hamidullah y le hizo desistir de su brutal interrogatorio, que había disgustado a Fielding más que a nadie. El abogado permaneció silencioso mientras se concretaban los detalles de la estancia de Miss Quested en el Instituto, limitándose a indicarle a Ronny cómo debía quedar muy claro que «Ni Mr. Fielding ni ninguno de nosotros es responsable de la seguridad de esta señora mientras permanezca en el recinto del Instituto», precisión con la que el Magistrado Municipal se

mostró de acuerdo. Después de esto se dedicó a observar el comportamiento semicaballeresco de los tres ingleses, divirtiéndose en silencio; en su opinión, Fielding se había mostrado increíblemente débil y estúpido, y también le asombraba la falta de amor propio en los dos jóvenes. Horas más tarde, cuando se dirigían a Dilkusha, Hamidullah le preguntó a Amritrao, que iba también con ellos:

—Míster Amritrao, ¿ha considerado usted la suma que Miss Quested debe pagar en concepto de compensación?

—Veinte mil rupias.

No se dijo nada más en aquel momento, pero la observación horrorizó a Fielding. No podía soportar la idea de que aquella extraña muchacha tan honesta fuera a perder su dinero y también posiblemente a su prometido. Adela pasó de repente a ocupar un lugar mucho más destacado en su imaginación. Y, fatigado por aquel día tan enorme y tan cruel, perdió su habitual visión equilibradla de las relaciones humanas y tuvo la impresión de que no existimos en nosotros mismos, sino tan sólo como nos ven las mentes de los demás; una idea sin fundamento lógico y que sólo le había asaltado anteriormente en otra ocasión: la tarde de la catástrofe, cuando desde la galería del Club viera los puños y los dedos de Marabar dilatarse hasta abarcar todo el cielo nocturno.

Capítulo vigésimo séptimo

—Aziz, ¿estás despierto?

—No, así que podemos hablar; soñemos planes para el futuro.

—Yo no sirvo para soñar.

—En ese caso, buenas noches, amigo mío.

El Banquete de la Victoria había terminado y los comensales estaban tumbados en la azotea de la mansión de Mr. Zulfiqar; unos dormían y otros contemplaban las estrellas a través de los mosquiteros. Exactamente encima de sus cabezas se hallaba la constelación del León y el disco de Régulo era tan grande y tan brillante que parecía un túnel, y cuando se aceptaba aquella idea todas las otras estrellas también parecían túneles.

—¿Estás contento con nuestro trabajo de hoy, Cyril? —continuó la voz a la izquierda de Fielding.

—¿Lo estás tú?

—Con la excepción de que he comido demasiado. «¿Qué tal el estómago, qué tal la cabeza?»… Lo que yo digo es que Panna Lal y Callendar se irán a la calle.

—Habrá una mudanza general en Chandrapore.

—Tendrán que ascenderte.

—En cualquier caso, lo que no pueden hacer es rebajarme de categoría.

—De todas formas, pasaremos las vacaciones juntos; visitaremos Cachemira, y posiblemente Persia, porque tendré mucho dinero. Que me será pagado en razón del perjuicio causado a mi reputación —explicó Aziz con cínica tranquilidad—. Mientras estés conmigo no tendrás que gastar ni un céntimo. Es lo que siempre he deseado, y ha venido a nacerse realidad como resultado de mis desventuras.

—Has logrado una gran victoria… —empezó Fielding.

—Ya lo sé, amigo mío, *ya* lo sé; no tienes por qué poner una voz tan solemne y llena de ansiedad. Sé también peque vas a decir a continuación: No hagas que Miss Quested te pague, y así los ingleses podrán decir: «He aquí un nativo que se ha portado como un caballero; si no fuera por su piel morena casi le dejaríamos ser miembro de nuestro Club.» El beneplácito de tus compatriotas ha dejado de interesarme; me he vuelto antibritánico, y tendría que haberlo hecho antes, porque así me hubiera evitado muchas calamidades.

—Incluido el conocerme a mí.

—Qué te parece si fuéramos a rociar con agua la cara de Mohammed Latif? Se pone muy divertido si se le moja mientras duerme.

Aquel comentario no era una pregunta, sino un punto y aparte. Fielding lo aceptó como tal y se produjo una pausa, agradablemente ocupada por una suave brisa que rozó la parte más alta de la casa. El banquete, aunque bullicioso, había sido agradable, y ahora la abigarrada mezcla de invitados disfrutaba de los placeres del ocio, desconocidos para Occidente, que sólo sabe trabajar o no hacer nada. La civilización, convertida en fantasma, deambula por el Oriente visitando de nuevo las ruinas imperiales, y no hay que pensaren encontrarla en grandes obras de arte ni en extraordinarias hazañas, sino en los gestos que los indios bien educados hacen al sentarse o cuando se tumban. Fielding, que se había vestido a lo indio, descubrió, gracias a su extraordinaria torpeza con aquel aderezo, que todos sus movimientos no pasaban de ser simples improvisaciones, mientras que cuando el Nabab Bahadur extendía una mano para coger la comida, o Nureddin aplaudía una canción, habían llevado a cabo un gesto bello, perfectamente acabado en sí mismo. Esta quietud del gesto no es, después

de todo, más que la Paz que sobrepasa el Entendimiento, el equivalente social del yoga. Cuando cesa el torbellino de la acción, este don se hace visible y pone de manifiesto una civilización que Occidente logra perturbar pero nunca adquirir. La mano se extiende para siempre, la rodilla, alzada tiene la eternidad de la tumba pero no su tristeza. Aziz rebosaba civilización aquella noche; había en él plenitud, dignidad y también dureza, y cuando el otro habló, lo hizo con desconfianza:

—Sí, debes dejar que Miss Quested salga bien librada de esto. Debe pagarte todos los gastos, eso es de justicia, pero no esta bien que la trates como a un enemigo después de la conquista.

—¿Es rica? Te comisiono para que lo averigües.

—Las sumas de las que se habló durante la cena, cuando todos os excitasteis tanto…, la arruinarían, son perfectamente absurdas. Mira…

—Estoy mirando, aunque apenas hay luz. Veo que Cyril Fielding es una excelente persona y mi mejor amigo, pero en ciertos asuntos un tonto de capirote. Crees que mostrándome generoso con Miss Quested mejoraré mi reputación y la de los indios en general. Y no es así en absoluto. Se interpretará como debilidad y como intento para conseguir de los ingleses un puesto mejor. De hecho, he decidido cortar todas mis relaciones con la India británica. Trataré de lograr un empleo en algún Estado musulmán, como Haidarabad o Bhopal, donde los ingleses no pueden insultarme más. No te esfuerces por aconsejarme otra cosa.

—Durante una larga conversación con Miss Quested…

—No quiero oír hablar de tus largas conversaciones.

—Calla un momento. Durante una larga conversación con Miss Quested he empezado a entender su forma de ser. No resulta fácil simpatizar con ella por esa especie de imposible seriedad moral con que lo juzga todo. Pero es una mujer absolutamente sincera y muy valiente. Cuando comprendió que se había equivocado, se paró de golpe y lo dijo. Me gustaría que te dieras cuenta de lo que eso significa. Con todos sus amigos alrededor, con todo el aparato gubernamental empujándola. Pero Miss Quested se detiene y hace añicos toda la tramoya. En su lugar yo no lo hubiera conseguido. Pero ella fue capaz de decir basta y casi llegó a convertirse en una heroína nacional,

pero mis alumnos nos metieron por una calle lateral antes de que la multitud se entusiasmara. Haz el favor de tratarla con consideración. No estaría bien que se llevara todas las bofetadas de tirios y troyanos. Sé lo que todos ellos —indicando las figuras cubiertas que descansaban en la azotea— querrían, pero no debes escucharlos. Sé misericordioso. Obra como uno de tus seis emperadores mongoles, o como todos ellos fundidos en uno.

—Ni siquiera los emperadores mongoles se mostraban misericordiosos sin recibir antes disculpas.

—Miss Quested te las pedirá, si es ése el problema —exclamó Fielding, incorporándose—. Escucha, te hago una oferta. Díctame la fórmula que quieras y mañana a esta hora te la traeré firmada. Sin renunciar por ello a cualquier disculpa pública que ella deba hacerte de acuerdo con la ley. Se trataría tan sólo de algo por añadidura.

—«Querido doctor Aziz, me gustaría que hubiese usted entrado conmigo en la cueva; soy más fea que un pecado y ésa era mi última oportunidad.» ¿Crees que firmaría eso?

—Bien, buenas noches, buenas noches; después de eso no hay duda de que es hora de irse a dormir.

—Supongo que sí, buenas noches.

—Me gustaría que no hicieras ese tipo de observaciones —continuó Fielding después de una pausa—. Es la única cosa tuya que no soporto.

—Yo, en cambio, soporto todas tus cosas, ésa es la diferencia.

—Me has herido diciendo eso; buenas noches. Se produjo un silencio y luego, como entre sueños pero con auténtico sentimiento, la voz dijo:

—Cyril, he tenido una idea que satisfará a esa mente tuya tan emotiva: consultaré a Mrs. Moore.

Fielding no pudo contestar, porque al abrir los ojos el resplandor de mil estrellas le obligó a guardar silencio.

—Su opinión solucionará todos los problemas; tengo una confianza absoluta en ella. Si me dice que perdone a esa chica, lo haré.

Ella nunca me aconsejaría nada contra mi verdadero honor, como quizá lo hicieras tú.

—Ya discutiremos eso mañana.

—¿No es extraño? Sigo olvidándome de que Mrs. Moore ha dejado la India. Mientras repetían su nombre a gritos en el juzgado me Leía la ilusión de que estaba presente. Había cerrado los ojos y me engañaba a mí mismo voluntariamente para sentir menos el dolor. Ahora, en este mismo instante, he vuelto a olvidarlo. Tendré que escribirle. Debe de estar muy lejos, cerca ya de reunirse con Ralph y Stella.

—¿Con quién?

—Sus otros hijos.

—No sabía que tuviera otros hijos.

—Mrs. Moore tiene dos chicos y una chica, igual que yo. Me lo dijo en la mezquita.

—La traté muy poco.

—Yo sólo la he visto tres veces, pero sé que es una oriental.

—Eres realmente fantástico… No estás dispuesto a tratar generosamente a Miss Quested; pero, en cambio, derramas a manos llenas sentimientos caballerescos sobre Mrs. Moore. Miss Quested, en cualquier caso, se comportó de manera muy decente esta mañana, mientras que la anciana señora nunca ha hecho por ti nada en absoluto y es una mera suposición que hubiera salido en defensa tuya: no hay más prueba que el cotilleo de unos criados. Tus emociones nunca parecen estar en proporción con sus objetos, Aziz.

—¿Acaso la emoción es un saco de patatas, a tanto la libra, que hace falta pesar? ¿Acaso soy una máquina? Acto seguido se me dirá que voy a desgastar mis emociones usándolas.

—Yo hubiese dicho que sí. Parece de sentido común. No es posible nadar y guardar la ropa, ni siquiera en el mundo del espíritu.

—Si estás en lo cierto, ninguna amistad tiene sentido; todo se reduce a dar y tomar, o dar y devolver, que es una cosa repugnante, y sería mejor que saltáramos todos ese pretil y nos matáramos. ¿Qué te pasa esta noche que te has vuelto materialista?

—Tu injusticia es peor que mi materialismo.

—Ya entiendo. ¿Tienes algo más de qué quejarte? —Aziz se mostraba de buen humor y afectuoso, pero resultaba un poco inquietante. La cárcel

había labrado canales para su carácter, quitándole algo de la flexibilidad que había tenido en el pasado—. Porque es mucho mejor que me cuentes todas tus dificultades con franqueza si hemos de ser amigos para siempre. No te gusta Mrs. Moore y estás molesto porque a mí sí, pero con el tiempo llegarás a quererla.

Cuando a una persona que está muerta se la supone viva» un algo enfermizo tiñe toda la conversación. Fielding no pudo resistir por más tiempo la tensión y dijo bruscamente:

—Siento decirte que Mrs. Moore ha muerto.

Pero Hamidullan, que había estado escuchando el diálogo y no quería que se echara a perder el carácter festivo de la velada, intervino desde la cama vecina:

—Aziz, está tratando de tomarte el pelo; no creas lo que te dice ese bribón.

—No me creo ni una palabra —dijo Aziz, que estaba habituado a las bromas pesadas, incluso de aquel tipo.

Fielding no dijo nada más. Los hechos son tos hechos, y todo el mundo se enteraría de la muerte de Mrs. Moore por la mañana. Pero se dio cuenta de que las personas no están realmente muertas hasta que se las siente como muertas. El mismo tenía una experiencia personal que lo confirmaba. Muchos años atrás había perdido a una gran amiga que creía en el paraíso cristiano y le aseguraba que después de los cambios y azares de esta vida mortal volverían a reunirse en el cielo. Fielding era un ateo convencido que no ocultaba sus ideas, pero sentía respeto por las opiniones de su amiga; hacerlo así es esencial en la amistad. Durante algún tiempo le pareció que la muerta le estaba esperando, y cuando la ilusión se desvaneció, dejó tras sí un vacío que era casi un sentimiento de culpabilidad: «Esto es realmente el fin —pensó Fielding— y yo le he dado el golpe definitivo.» Había tratado de matar a Mrs. Moore aquella noche, en la azotea de la casa del Nabab Bahadur; pero ella logró eludirle, y no llegó a alterarse la serenidad de la velada. Poco después se alzó la luna: el exhausto cuarto creciente que precede al sol; hombres y bueyes comenzaron en seguida sus interminables

tareas, y el placentero intermedio que Fielding había tratado de acortar llegó a su inevitable conclusión.

Capítulo vigésimo octavo

Mrs. Moore estaba muerta: depositada en las profundidades del mar cuando iba todavía rumbo al Sur, porque los buques que zarpan de Bombay no pueden apuntar a Europa hasta después de dar la vuelta alrededor de Arabia; cuando el sol la tocó por ultima vez y su cuerpo fue depositado en otra India (el océano indico) se hallaba más dentro del trópico que durante toda su permanencia en tierra firme. Mrs. Moore dejó tras sí un rencoroso pesar, porque una muerte da mala reputación al barco donde se produce. ¿Quién era aquella Mrs. Moore? Cuando llegaron a Aden, telegrafió, escribió, hizo todo lo que estaba en su mano por mostrarse amable, pero la esposa de un Vicegobernador no tiene necesidad de semejantes experiencias, y se le oyó repetir varias veces: «Sólo hacía unas horas que conocía a esa pobre mujer cuando se puso enferma; todo esto ha sido innecesariamente penoso y echa a perder la alegría de volver a casa.» Un fantasma siguió al barco por el mar Rojo, pero no consiguió entrar en él.

Alrededor de Suez se produce siempre un cambio social: las normas y los horarios asiáticos se debilitan y los europeos empiezan a dejarse sentir. En Port Said el norte gris y ventoso hizo acto de presencia. El tiempo era tan frío y vigorizante que los pasaderos creyeron que también sería distinto en el país recién abandonado pero en la India el calor siguió aumentando acuerdo con sus leyes habituales.

En Chandrapore, la muerte de Mrs. Moore adoptó formas más sutiles y más duraderas. Surgió la leyenda de que un inglés había matado a su madre que trataba de salvar la vida de un indio; había en ello la suficiente dosis de verdad como para molestar a las autoridades. A veces era una vaca asesinada o un cocodrilo con colmillos de jabalí que había salido del Ganges. Disparates de este tipo son más difíciles de combatir que las mentiras con todas las de la ley, porque se esconden en los montones de desperdicios y avanzan cuando nadie está mirando. En un determinado momento se supo de dos tumbas diferentes que contenían los restos dé Esmiss Ésmur: una al lado de la tenería y la otra mis de mercancías. Mr. McBryde visitó ambas y vio signos del comienzo de un culto; platos de barro y otros objetos parecidos. Como era un funcionario experimentado no hizo nada que resultara irritante, y al cabo de una semana la comezón desapareció.

—Detrás de todo esto hay una operación de propaganda —dijo, olvidando que cien años antes, cuando los europeos todavía se instilaban en el campo, se convertían a veces en demonios locales después de su muerte: quizá no en un dios completo, sólo en parte de uno, añadiendo un epíteto o un gesto a lo que ya existía, de la misma manera que los dioses contribuyen a los grandes dioses, y éstos a su vez al Ser Supremo de la filosofía.

Ronny se repitió a sí mismo que su madre había dejado la India por voluntad propia, pero su conciencia no estaba tranquila. Se había portado mal, y tenía que arrepentirse (lo que llevaba consigo un completo vuelco mental) o persistir en su dureza con ella. Ronny eligió este último camino. ¡Qué molesta había sido su defensa de Aziz! ¡Qué negativa su influencia sobre Adela! Y aún seguía creando dificultades con aquellas ridículas «tumbas», mezclándose con los nativos. Mrs. Moore no estaba ya en condiciones de hacer nada por evitarlo, evidentemente, pero en vida había intentado llevar a cabo expediciones similares e igualmente exasperantes y Ronny no dejaba de reprochárselo. El joven Magistrado Municipal tenía muchos motivos de preocupación —el calor, las tensiones locales, la próxima visita del Vicegobernador, los problemas de Adela— y enlazándolos todos hasta formar una grotesca guirnalda estaba la

indianización de Mrs. Moore. ¿Qué sucede con la propia madre cuando muere? Es de suponer que vaya al cielo, y en cualquier caso desaparece. La religión de Ronny pertenecía al tipo esterilizado de los colegios privados ingleses: nunca se echa a perder, ni siquiera en los trópicos. Donde quiera que entraba —mezquita, cueva o templo—, Ronny mantenía la perspectiva espiritual del bachillerato, y condenaba como «perjudicial» cualquier intento de comprender aquellas realidades. Dominándose, consiguió apartar todo el asunto de su imaginación. A su debido tiempo, él y sus hermanastros colocarían una lápida en la iglesia de Northamptonshire que Mrs. Moore frecuentaba y en la que dejarían constancia de las fechas de su nacimiento y de su muerte y del hecho de que había sido enterrada en el mar. Eso sería suficiente.

En cuanto a Adela…, también tendría que marcharse; Ronny había confiado en que lo sugiriese ella misma. A él le resultaba imposible casarse con Miss Quested: hubiera significado el fin de su carrera. Pobre y lamentable Adela… La muchacha seguía en el Instituto gracias a la cortesía de Fielding: una situación impropia y humillante, pero ninguno de los ingleses quería recibirla. Ronny había decidido posponer toda conversación privada con su prometida hasta que se dictara sentencia: Aziz la había demandado por daños y perjuicios ante un tribunal inferior. Cuando aquello terminara Ronny le pediría que rompiera su compromiso. Adela había matado su amor, que nunca había sido demasiado robusto; jamás hubieran llegado a prometerse a no ser por el accidente con el coche del Nabab Bahadur. Miss Quested pertenecía al período académico de su vida —lleno de inexperiencia— que ya había superado: Grasmere, paseos y conversaciones sobre temas serios, todo ese tipo de cosas.

Capítulo vigésimo noveno

La visita del Vicegobernador de la provincia fue la etapa siguiente en la descomposición del asunto Marabar. Sir Gilbert, si» ser un hombre ilustrado, mantenía opiniones que sí lo eran. Exento, gracias a una larga carrera en el ministerio, del contacto personal con los pueblos de la India, podía hablar de ellos cortésmente y deplorar los prejuicios raciales. Sir Gilbert aplaudió el resultado del juicio y felicitó a Fielding por haber adoptado «una actitud abierta, razonable y caritativa desde el primer momento. Hablando confidencialmente…», continuó el Vicegobernador. A Fielding no le gustaban las confidencias, pero Sir Gilbert insistía en concederlas; el asunto había sido «torpemente tratado por ciertos amigos nuestros» que no se daban cuenta de que «las manecillas del reloj se mueven hacia adelante, no hacia atrás», etc. Una cosa si podía garantizar: el Director del Instituto recibiría una invitación muy cordial para reincorporarse al Club, y él le suplicaba, más bien le ordenaba, que la aceptase. El Vicegobernador regresó muy satisfecho a sus alturas del Himalaya; los detalles locales, como la cantidad de dinero que Miss Quested tuviese que pagar, o la naturaleza exacta de lo sucedido en las cuevas, no eran de su incumbencia.

Fielding se encontró más y más metido en los asuntos de Miss Quested. El Instituto seguía cerrado, y él comía y dormía en casa de Hamidullah, de

manera que no había razón para que Adela no siguiera allí si así lo deseaba. En su lugar él hubiera optado por marcharse antes que aceptar las protocolarias atenciones de Ronny, pero la muchacha estaba esperando a que se vaciara el reloj de arena de su estancia. Una casa donde vivir y un jardín donde pasear durante el breve período de tiempo en que disminuía el calor era todo lo que ella pedía, y Fielding estaba en condiciones de proporcionárselo. El desastre había hecho que Adela tomara conciencia de sus limitaciones y el Director del Instituto se daba cuenta ahora de que la muchacha era una persona excelente, llena de lealtad. Su humildad resultaba conmovedora. Nunca se quejaba de que tanto ingleses como indios estuvieran en contra suya; lo creía castigo adecuado a su estupidez. Cuando Fielding le insinuó la conveniencia de que se disculpara con Aziz de manera personal, Adela dijo tristemente:

—Por supuesto. Tendría que habérseme ocurrido antes; el instinto nunca me ayuda. ¿Por qué no fui corriendo a él después del juicio? Sí. claro que le escribiré pidiendo disculpas, pero ¿querrá usted dictarme la carta?

Entre los dos prepararon un texto lleno de conmovedoras, pero que resultaba frío al utilizarlo como carta.

—¿Debo escribir otra? —preguntó ella—. No tal de que pueda reparar el daño que he causado. Soy capaz de hacer bien estoy aquello, pero al poner juntas las dos cosas resulta que están mal. Ése es el defecto de mi carácter. de ello hasta ahora. Creía que si era imparcial y procuraba enterarme bien podría superar todas las dificultades.

—Nuestra carta fracasa por una simple razón con la que más vale enfrentarse: no siente usted verdadero afecto ni por Aziz ni por los indios en general —replicó Fielding.

Adela asintió.

—Cuando la conocí, estaba usted empeñada en ver la India, no a los indios, y en seguida se me ocurrió: Ah, esto no nos llevará muy lejos. Los indios saben si se les quiere o no; en eso engañarlos. La justicia nunca les satisface, y esa es la razón de que el Imperio británico tenga los pies de barro.

—Pero ¿es que en realidad quiero a alguien?

Probablemente quería a Heaslop, pero de conversación, porque aquel aspecto de su vida no era asunto suyo.

Por otra parte, sus amigos indios estaban un poco fuera de si. La victoria, que hubiese hecho muy cautos a los ingleses, a ellos les volvió agresivos. Querían desarrollar una ofensiva y trataban de hacerlo descubriendo nuevos agravios e injusticias que no existían en su mayor parte. Padecían la habitual desilusión que trae consigo la guerra. Los objetivos de la batalla y los frutos de la conquista nunca coinciden; estos últimos tienen su valor y sólo el santo los rechaza pero su promesa de inmortalidad desaparecerá en cuanto se los tiene en la mano. Aunque Sir Gilbert se había mostrado cortés, casi obsequioso, la estructura que él representaba no había inclinado la cabeza en modo alguno. El oficialismo británico seguía existiendo, tan omnipresente y molesto como el sol, y el siguiente paso que debía darse no estaba demasiado claro, ni siquiera para Mahmoud Ali. Se hablaba mucho y con cierta violencia y se intentaron actos ilegales de menor cuantía; pero detrás de todo ello seguía existiendo un deseo genuino, aunque impreciso, de educarse.

—Mr. Fielding, tenemos que educarnos todos rápidamente.

Aziz se mostraba amistoso y dominante. Quería que Fielding «se entregara al Oriente», como él decía, y viviera en una situación de afectuosa dependencia.

—Puedes fiarte de mí, Cyril.

Fielding no dudaba en absoluto de Aziz y además carecía de raíces entre su propio pueblo. Sin embargo, no podía convertirse en una especie de Mohammed Latif. Cuando discutían acerca de ello, algo racial se mezclaba en la conversación: sin amargura, pero inevitablemente, como la tonalidad de su piel: color café *venus* grisrosáceo.

—¿No ves que te agradezco la ayuda que me has prestado y quiero recompensarte? —concluía Aziz.

—Si quieres recompensarme, no hagas que Miss Quested tenga que pagarte —replicaba el otro.

Su insensibilidad hacia Adela le molestaba. Desde cualquier punto de vista lo correcto sería tratarla generosamente, y un ¿lía se le ocurrió apelar a

la memoria de Mrs. Moore. Aziz sentía un fantástico aprecio por ella. Su muerte había llenado de pesar su afectuoso corazón; Aziz lloró como un niño y ordenó a sus tres hijos que también lloraran. No había duda de que respetaba y quería a Mrs. Moore. La primera tentativa de Fielding fracasó.

—Yo veo cuál es tu truco —fue la respuesta—. Quiero vengarme de ellos. ¿Por qué tendría que sufrir y aguantar sus insultos, permitir que lean mis cartas y que lleven a la comisaría la fotografía de mi mujer? Además, quiero el dinero para educar a mis hijos, como le expliqué a ella.

Pero después empezó a ablandarse y Fielding no tuvo reparos en practicar un poco de necromancia. Siempre que surgía el asunto de la compensación económica, el Director del Instituto introducía el nombre de la muerta. De la misma manera que otros propagandistas le inventaban una tumba, Fielding, sin decir nada que creyera positivamente falso, pero dando forma a algo que estaba con toda probabilidad muy lejos de ser cierto, creó una discutible imagen de Mrs. Moore en el corazón de Aziz. El joven médico cedió de repente. Se convenció de que la anciana señora deseaba que perdonase a la mujer que iba a casarse con su hijo, que era aquélla la única manera que tenía de honrarla, y, con una hermosa y apasionada explosión sentimental, renunció a todo el dinero a que tenía derecho en concepto de compensación, reclamando sólo las costas del proceso. Fue un gran gesto por su parte, y, como él mismo había previsto, no sirvió para mejorar la opinión que los ingleses tenían de él. Siguieron creyendo que era culpable, mantuvieron la misma opinión hasta el final de su carrera e incluso angloindios retirados se murmuraban uno a otro, en Tunbridge Wells o en Cheltenham: —Aquel asunto de Marabar que se vino abajo porque a la pobre chica le faltó valor para prestar declaración…, aquél fue otro caso bien triste.

Cuando todo hubo terminado oficialmente, Ronny, que estaba a punto de ser trasladado a otro lugar de la provincia, se acercó a Fielding con su habitual envaramiento y dijo:

—Quisiera agradecerle la ayuda que ha prestado usted a Miss Quested, que, por supuesto, no desea abusar mis de su hospitalidad; de hecho ha

decidido regresar a Inglaterra. Acabo de gestionar su pasaje de vuelta. Creo que a ella le gustaría verle.

—Iré inmediatamente.

Al llegar al Instituto, Fielding encontró a Miss Quested bastante afectada. En seguida supo que Heaslop había roto su compromiso matrimonial.

—Ronny ha resultado ser mucho más juicioso que yo —dijo Adela con gesto patético—. Tendría que haber hablad» yo, pero k› fui dejando, preguntándome qué pasaría. Yo hubiese seguido adelante de buena gana, echando a perder su vida por pura inercia: y una llega a no tener nada que hacer, a no tener raíces en ningún sitio y a convertirse incluso en un estorbo público sin darse cuesta de ello. —Para tranquilizar a Fielding, añadió—: Hablo únicamente de la India. En Inglaterra no me sentiré perdida. Allí tengo un sitio…, no, no creo que haga daño a nadie en Inglaterra. Cuando me vea de nuevo en Londres me dedicaré a trabajar en algo. Tengo el dinero suficiente para empezar, y montones de amigos de mi mismo estilo. Estaré perfectamente. —Luego dejó escapar un piro—. Pero los problemas que he causado aquí a todo a mundo…, eso no podré olvidarlo nunca. Todas mis preocupaciones para saber si debíamos casarnos o no… y al final Ronny y yo nos separamos y ni siquiera lo sentimos. Nunca debíamos haber pensado en el matrimonio. ¿No se sorprendió usted cuando se hizo el anuncio de nuestro compromiso?

—No mucho. A mi edad uno se asombra él, sonriendo—. El matrimonio es una cosa completamente en cualquier caso. Empieza y continúa por razones de poquísimo peso. Las estructuras sociales lo apoyan por un lado y tinglado teológico por el otro, pero ninguna de las dos cosas es el matrimonio, ¿no es cierto? Tengo amigos que no recuerdan por que se casaron, ni tampoco sus mujeres. Sospecho que en la mayoría de los casos es algo que sucede por casualidad, aun que después se inventasen diferentes razones, todas muy nobles. En lo se refiere soy un cínico.

—Yo no lo soy. Este comienzo en falso ha sido exclusivamente culpa mía. Yo no aportaba a Ronny nada que él necesitase, y ésa es la razón de que me haya rechazado. Entré en aquella cueva pensando: «¿Le quiero de

verdad?» Esto no se lo he contado todavía, Mr. Fielding. No me sentía justificada. Ternura, respeto, posibilidad de comunicación…, quería que esas cosas ocupasen el lugar de…

—A mi ya no me interesa el amor —dijo él, proporcionándole la palabra.

—A mí tampoco. Mis experiencias de aquí me han curado. Pero quiero que otros lo deseen.

—Pero, volviendo a nuestra primera conversación (porque supongo que ésta es la última), ¿quién la siguió?, ¿o es que no la siguió nadie? ¿Está usted ahora en condiciones de decirlo? No me gustaría dejar esto en el aire.

—Digamos que fue el guía —respondió ella sin interés—. No lo sabremos nunca. Es como si pasara el dedo sobre la pared pulimentada de la cueva en la oscuridad y no pudiera llegar más allá. Me tropiezo con algo, y lo mismo le pasa a usted. Mrs. Moore sí lo sabía.

—¿Cómo podía saber ella lo que nosotros ignoramos?

—Telepatía, posiblemente.

Aquella palabra pretenciosa y con tan poco contenido se vino abajo inmediatamente. ¿Telepatía? ¡Vaya explicación! Era mejor retirarla, y Adela así lo hizo. Había llegado al límite de sus posibilidades espirituales, y lo mismo le sucedía a Fielding. ¿Existían otros mundos que nunca serían capaces de tocar, o, por el contrario, entraban en el campo de su conciencia todas las experiencias posibles? No estaban en condiciones de decirlo. Sólo se daban cuenta de que su punto de vista era más o menos semejante, y encontraban satisfacción en ello. Quizá la vida sea misterio y no simple confusión; no podían decirlo. Quizá las cien Indias que se inquietan y disputan tan tediosamente son sólo una, y el universo que reflejan también es uno, pero ellos carecían de los instrumentos para juzgarlo.

—Escríbame cuando llegue a Inglaterra.

—Lo haré a menudo. Ha sido usted extraordinariamente amable conmigo. Me doy cuenta ahora al marcharme. A cambio me gustaría poder hacer algo por usted, pero veo que tiene todo lo que quiere.

—Creo que sí —respondió él después de una pausa—. Nunca me he sentido aquí más feliz y más seguro. Realmente me entiendo bien con los

indios, y ellos confían en mí. Resulta agradable no haber tenido que dejar mi trabajo. También es agradable recibir elogios de un Vicegobernador. Hasta el próximo terremoto seguiré igual que ahora.

—A mí me ha afectado mucho la muerte de Mrs. Moore.

—También Aziz se sentía muy ligado a ella.

—Pero me ha hecho recordar que todos hemos de morir; que las relaciones personales que forman el entramado de nuestra vida son temporales. Solía tener la impresión de que la muerte seleccionaba a las personas; es una idea que se saca de las novelas, porque de ordinario algunos de los personajes siguen hablando hasta el final.

—Ahora empieza a ser una cosa muy real para mí que «la muerte no perdona a nadie».

—No permita que se haga demasiado real, o de lo contrario tamil también se morirá usted. Ese es el inconveniente que tiene meditar sobre la muerte. Nos sometemos a aquello en lo que trabajamos. Yo he sentido esa misma tentación y tuve que cambiar de rumbo. Quiero seguir viviendo un poco más.

—Yo también.

Flotaba en la atmósfera una cordialidad como de enanos estrechándose la mano. Hombre y mujer se hallaban en la plenitud de sus facultades: eran razonables, sinceros, incluso sutiles. Hablaban el mismo idioma, tenían las mismas opiniones, y la diferencia de edad y sexo no les distanciaba. Y, sin embargo, no se sentían satisfechos. Cuando se mostraban de acuerdo, «Quiero seguir viviendo un poco más», o «No creo en Dios», después de las palabras se producía una curiosa contracorriente, como si el universo se hubiera desplazado para llenar un vacío diminuto, o como si hubieran visto tus propios gestos desde una altura inmensa: enanos hablando, estrechándose la mano y asegurándose el uno al otro que habían alcanzado el mismo nivel de discernimiento. No pensaban que estuvieran equivocados, porgue tan pronto como las personas honestas piensan que están equivocadas aparece la inestabilidad. Para ella* no existía una meta infinita más allá de las estrellas y nunca la habían buscado. Pero, al igual que en otras ocasiones, la añoranza de apoderó de ellos; la sombra de la

sombra de un sueño se proyecta sobre sus intereses claramente definidos, y, de nuevo, objete» nunca vistos parecieron transformarse en mensajes de otro mundo.

—Y si me lo permite, le diré que siento una gran simpatía por usted —afirmó Fielding.

—Me alegro, porque a mí me sucede lo mismo con usted. Ojalá podamos volver a vernos.

—Nos veremos en Inglaterra, si alguna vez pido permiso para volver a casa.

—Supongo que de momento no hay muchas posibilidades de que lo haga.

—Es bastante probable. En realidad tengo un plan en marcha en estos momentos.

—Eso sería estupendo.

Y así terminó la conversación. Adela se puso en camino diez días; después, siguiendo la misma ruta que su amiga muerta. Había llegado la última oleada de calor que precede a los monzones. Todo el país estaba agotado y como borroso. Las casas, los árboles y los campos parecían moldeados con la misma pasta marrón, y en Bombay el mar chocaba contra los muelles como si fuese caído. La última aventura india de Miss Quested tuvo como protagonista a Antony, que subió al barco detrás de ella y trató dé hacerle chantaje Dijo que Adela había sido la amante de Mr. Fielding. Quizás Antony no estaba de acuerdo con la propina recibida. Miss Quested hizo que lo echaran del barco, pero la historia produjo considerable escándalo, y los demás pasajeros apenas hablaron con Adela durante la primera parte del viaje. Mientras atravesaban el océano indico y el mar Rojo, Miss Quested se quedó sola consigo misma y con los posos de Chandrapore.

La llegada a Egipto hizo que cambiara la atmósfera. La arena limpia amontonada a ambos lados del canal pareció borrar todo lo que era difícil y equívoco, e incluso Port Said creaba una impresión e gracia y de pureza con la luz gris-rosácea del amanecer. Adela desembarcó allí con un misionero

americano; fueron andando hasta la estatua de Lesseps, y bebieron con fruición el aire tónico de Levante.

—¿A qué deberes en su propio país retorna usted, Miss Quested, después de su contacto con los trópicos? —le preguntó el misionero—. Fíjese en que no digo a qué deberes torna, sino retorna. Toda vida debiera contener un tornar y un re-tornar. Este célebre pionero (señalando la estatua) aclarará mi pregunta. Se torna hacia el Este, pero se re-torna hacia Occidente. Lo notará usted en la elegante posición de sus manos, con una de las cuales sostiene una ristra de salchichas.

El misionero se la quedó mirando con expresión jocosa, tratando de disimular así su vacuidad mental. No tenía ni la menor idea de lo que quería decir con «tornar» y «retornar», pero con frecuencia usaba las palabras a pares, para conseguir un tono de sagacidad moral.

—Ya veo —replicó Adela.

Súbitamente, en la claridad mediterránea, había visto. Su primer deber al retornar a Inglaterra era ir a visitar a aquellos otros hijos de Mrs. Moore, Ralph y Stella; después tornaría a su profesión. Mrs. Moore había procurado mantener aparte los productos de sus dos matrimonios y Adela no había tenido aún ocasión de conocer a los más jóvenes.

Capítulo trigésimo

Otra consecuencia local del proceso fue una entente hindú-musulmana. Ruidosas protestas de amistad se intercambiaron entre prominentes ciudadanos, y unido a ella iba un genuino deseo de llegar a un mejor entendimiento. Aziz, un día que estaba en el hospital, recibió la visita de una figura bastante simpática: Mr. Das. El magistrado quería pedirle dos favores: un remedio para el herpes y un poema para la nueva revista mensual de su cuñado. Ambos le fueron concedidos.

—Mi querido Das, ¿por qué, si usted trató de mandarme a la cárcel, tendría yo que enviar un poema a Mr. Bhattacharya? ¿Eh? Naturalmente, esto no es más que una broma. Escribiré lo mejor que pueda, pero tenía la impresión de que su revista era para hindúes.

—No es para hindúes, sino para indios en general —dijo el otro, tímidamente.

—No existe ninguna persona que sea un indio en general.

—No existía, pero quizás exista cuando usted haya escrito un poema. Es usted nuestro héroe; toda la ciudad está con usted, prescindiendo de su credo religioso.

—Lo sé, pero ¿durará?

—Me temo que no —dijo Das, que era un hombre de gran claridad mental—. Y por esa razón, si se me permite decirlo, Haga el favor de no

introducir demasiadas expresiones persas en el poema y no insistir mucho en el *bulbuí*.

—Un segundo —dijo Aziz, mordiendo el lápiz. Estaba escribiendo una receta—. Aquí tiene… ¿No es esto mejor que un poema?

—Feliz el hombre que puede componer los dos.

—¡Muchos elogios me nace usted hoy!

—Sé que me guarda usted rencor por haber sido el juez de su caso —dijo el otro, extendiendo la mano de manera impulsiva—. Es usted muy amable y amistoso, pero siempre detecto ironía detrás de sus palabras.

—No, no, ¡qué cosa más absurda! —protestó Aziz.

Se estrecharon la mano en un medio abrazo que simbolizaba la entente. Entre personas de distintos climas existe siempre la posibilidad de romance, pero las diferentes clases de indios saben demasiado los unos de los otros para superar fácilmente lo incognoscible. El intento de aproximación resulta prosaico.

—Excelente —dijo Aziz, dando palmadas sobre un hombro robusto y pensando: «Preferiría que no me recordaran el estiércol de vaca», mientras Das comentaba interiormente: «Algunos musulmanes son muy violentos.»

Los dos sonrieron nostálgicamente, tratando de descubrir el pensamiento en el corazón del otro, y Das, que tenía mayor facilidad de expresión, dijo finalmente.

—Disculpe mis errores, dese cuenta de mis limitaciones. La vida no es fácil tal como la conocemos en la tierra.

—Pero, volviendo a ese poema, ¿cómo se enteró usted de que yo garrapateo versos a veces? —preguntó Aziz, muy satisfecho y bastante conmovido, porque la literatura siempre le había servido de solaz y era algo que la fealdad de los hechos no conseguía estropear.

—El profesor Godbole lo mencionaba frecuentemente antes de marcharse a Mau.

—¿Cómo lo supo él?

—También él es poeta; ¿no se descubren ustedes entre sí sin necesidad de palabras?

Halagado por la invitación, Aziz se puso a trabajar aquella noche. El peso de la pluma entre los dedos generaba *bulbules* inmediatamente. Su poema hablaba una vez más de la decadencia del Islam y de la brevedad del amor; todo lo triste y dulce que él era capaz de lograr, pero sin base en ninguna experiencia personal y sin interés para aquellos excelentes hindúes. Sintiéndose descontento, se pasó de golpe al otro extremo, y escribió una sátira demasiado difamatoria para que fuera posible publicarla. Sólo era capaz de expresar patetismo o de destilar veneno, aunque la mayor parte de su vida nada tenía que ver con ninguna de las dos cosas. Aziz amaba la poesía —la ciencia no era más que algo adquirido, que dejaba a un lado cuando nadie le veía, como su ropa europea—, y aquella tarde anhelaba componer una nueva canción que fuese aclamada por las multitudes e incluso repetida en los campos por los labradores. ¿En qué idioma habría que escribirla? ¿Y qué debería anunciar? Se prometió conocer mejor a los indios que no eran mahometanos y no volver nanea la vista atrás. Es la única solución razonable. ¿De qué sirven, en este lugar y en esta época, las glorias de Córdoba y de Samarkanda? Han desaparecido para siempre, y mientras nos lamentamos por ello los ingleses ocupan Delhi y nos excluyen de África Oriental. El Islam mismo, aunque verdadero, arroja luces opuestas sobre la senda de la libertad. La canción del futuro tiene que trascender los credos religiosos. El poema para Mr. Bhattacharya nunca llegó a escribirse, pero tuvo su efecto. Orientó a Aziz hacia la incierta y colosal figura de una patria. El joven médico no sentía un afecto natural por la tierra en la que había nacido, pero las Colinas de Marabar le empujaban en aquella dirección. Cerrando a medias los ojos, Aziz trató de amar a la india. Su país tenía que imitar al Japón. Hasta que no fuese una nación, nadie trataría a sus hijos con respeto. Aziz se hizo más duro y menos tratable. Los ingleses, de quienes se había reído o había ignorado, lo perseguían por todas partes; incluso arrojaban redes sobre sus sueños.

—Mi gran equivocación ha sido tomarme en broma a nuestros gobernantes —le dijo a Hamidullah al día siguiente.

—Es sin duda la manera más prudente de tomárselos —replicó el otro con un suspiro—, pero no resulta posible a la larga. Antes o después se

produce un desastre como el tuyo y hace que salgan a la luz sus pensamientos secretos sobre nuestro carácter. Si Dios mismo descendiera del cielo, se presentara en el Club y dijera que eres inocente, no le creerían. Ahora entenderás por qué Mahmoud Ali y yo mismo perdemos tanto tiempo intrigando y en compañía de criaturas como Ram Chand.

—No soporto los comités. Me marcharé inmediatamente.

—¿Adonde? Los Turton y los Burton son todos iguales.

—Pero no en un Estado indio.

—Creo que los consejeros británicos en los estados nativos están obligados a mostrarse más corteses. Eso es todo.

—Quiero dejar la India británica, aunque sea por un trabajo mal pagado. Creo que allí podré escribir poesía. Quisiera haber vivido en la época de Babur y haber luchado y escrito para él. «Desaparecido, desaparecido», y no sirve de nada repetirlo, porque nos debilita mientras lo hacemos. Necesitamos un rey, Hamidullah; haría más fáciles nuestras vidas. De hecho, tenemos que tratar de sentir aprecio por esos pintorescos hindúes. Mi idea es conseguir un puesto como médico en uno de sus estados.

—Eso es ir demasiado lejos.

—No tan lejos como confraternizar con Mr. Ram Chand.

—Pero ¿y el dinero? Esos rajás salvajes nunca pagarás salarios dignos.

—De todas formas, no seré nunca rico, no va con mi carácter.

—Si hubieras sido razonable y hecho que Miss Quested te pagara…

—Decidí que no fuera así. Discutir sobre el pasado es inútil —dijo Aziz, con tono repentinamente cortante—. Le he permitido conservar su fortuna, que sin duda le será muy necesaria para comprarse: un marido en Inglaterra. No vuelvas a hablarme de ese asunto.

—Muy bien, pero tendrás que seguir llevando la vida de un hombre pobre; nada de vacaciones en Cachemira por el momento; has de seguir con tu profesión hasta que consigas un puesto bien pagado, en lugar de retirarte a un estado de la jungla y escribir poemas. Educa a tus hijos, lee las últimas revistas científicas, obliga a los médicos europeos a respetarte. Acepta como un hombre las consecuencias de tus propias acciones. Aziz le hizo un guiño lentamente y dijo: —Ahora no estamos ante un tribunal. Hay muchas

maneras de ser hombre; la mía es expresar lo que hay de más profundo en mi corazón.

—Ante esa observación no existe respuesta posible —dijo Hamidullah, conmovido. Luego, recobrándose, añadió sonriendo—: ¿Estás enterado de ese pícaro rumor que Mohammed Latif ha recogido por ahí? —¿Cuál?

—Cuando Miss Quested estuvo alojada en el Instituto, Fielding solía visitarla», muy tarde por la noche, según dicen los criados.

—Un agradable cambio para ella, si es que el rumor es cierto —dijo Aziz, poniendo una cara muy rara.

—Pero ¿entiendes lo que quiero decir?

El joven médico volvió a guiñar el ojo y dijo: —¡Con toda claridad! Pero eso que dices no me ayuda a superar mis dificultades. Estoy decidido a abandonar Chandrapore. El problema es ¿para ir dónde? Estoy decidido a escribir poesía. El problema es ¿acerca de qué? Tú no me prestas la menor ayuda —inmediatamente, sorprendiendo a Hamiaullah y también a sí mismo, Aziz tuvo una explosión de mal humor—. Pero ¿es que acaso hay alguien que me ayude? No tengo ningún amigo. Todos me traicionan, incluso mis propios hijos. Estoy harto de amigos.

—Iba a sugerirte que pasáramos detrás del *purdah*, pero tus tres traicioneros hijos están allí, de manera que no querrás hacerlo.

—Lo siento; desde que estuve en la cárcel tengo los nervios deshechos; llévame contigo y perdóname.

—La madre de Nureddin está visitando ahora a mi mujer. Imagino que no te importa.

—Las he visto por separado, pero hasta ahora nunca juntas. Será mejor que las prepares para el impacto de mi cara.

—No, vamos a sorprenderlas sin avisar, porque nuestras queridas damas indias aún siguen haciendo muchas tonterías. Durante tu proceso fingieron que iban a renunciar al *purdah*; de hecho, las que saben escribir redactaron un documento en ese sentido, pero ahora todo ha quedado en nada. Sabes lo mucho que todas respetan a Fielding, pero ninguna lo ha visto. Mi mujer dice que sí, que lo verá, ero cuando viene de visita encuentra alguna excusa: no se siente bien, se avergüenza de la habitación, no tiene dulces de buena

calidad que ofrecerle, sólo Orejas de Elefante, y si yo digo que las Orejas de Elefante son el dulce preferido de Mr. Fielding, ella me responde que entonces se dará cuenta de lo mal hechos que están los suyos, de manera que no puede recibirle por ese motivo. Por espacio de quince años, mi querido muchacho, he discutido con mi begum, por espacio de quince años, y nunca he salido victorioso; sin embargo, los misioneros nos aseguran que nuestras mujeres están oprimidas. Si necesitas un tema para un poema, utiliza éste: La dama india tal como es y no tal como se supone que es.

Capítulo trigésimo primero

Para Aziz tas pruebas carecían de importancia. La sucesión de sus emociones determinaba sus creencias, y en este caso condujo a la trágica frialdad entre él y su amigo inglés. Habían logrado una victoria, pero nunca llegarían a ser coronados como triunfadores. Fielding estaba de viaje para asistir a una conferencia, y bastó que el rumor sobre Miss Quested no fuera desmentido durante unos cuantos días para que Aziz lo diera por cierto. Desde un punto de vista moral, no tenía la menor objeción a que sus amigos se divirtieran; en cuanto a Cyril, ya de mediana edad, no cabía esperar que obtuviera las mejores piezas del mercado femenino y era lógico que se viera forzado a aceptar los entretenimientos que se ponían a su alcance. Pero al joven médico le parecía mal que se entendiera precisamente con una mujer a la que él seguía considerando su enemiga; además, ¿por qué no se lo había hecho saber? ¿Qué valor tiene la amistad si no existen confidencias? El mismo había contado cosas que se consideraban a veces ofensivas, y el inglés las había escuchado con actitud tolerante, pero sin corresponder con nada parecido.

Aziz fue a recibir a Fielding a la estación al regreso de su viaje, aceptó su invitación para cenar juntos y luego empezó a atacarle utilizando el método indirecto y sin perder la apariencia de buen humor. Existía ya un escándalo entre europeos públicamente reconocido: Mr. McBryde y Miss

Derek. Ya estaba explicado el extraordinario afecto de Miss Derek por Chandrapore; Mr. McBryde había sido sorprendido en la habitación de aquélla y su mujer quería el divorcio.

—¡Un hombre de mente tan pura! Como es lógico, le echará la culpa al clima indio. En realidad, nosotros tenemos la culpa de todo. ¿No estás de acuerdo en que te he proporcionado una noticia importante?

—No mucho —dijo Fielding, que sentía escaso interés por pecados que le afectaban de cerca—. Deja que yo te cuente las mías. —El rostro de Aziz se iluminó—. Se ha decidido en la conferencia…

—Será mejor dejar para la noche los problemas sobre la enseñanza. Ahora tengo que irme directamente al hospital; el cólera presenta muy mal cariz. Empezamos a tener casos locales, además de los importados. De hecho, la vida en conjunto resulta bastante triste. El nuevo Cirujano-Jefe es igual que el anterior, aunque todavía no se atreve a demostrarlo públicamente. Eso es todo lo que se consigue con cualquier cambio administrativo. Todos mis sufrimientos no han servido de nada, Pero déjame que te cuente otra cosa antes de que se me olvide. Los rumores no son sólo acerca de McBryde, también se habla de ti. Dicen que Miss Quested y tú llegasteis a tener una amistad demasiado íntima. Sí he de ser completamente franco, aseguran que os habéis comportado de manera deshonesta.

—Siempre acaban diciendo cosas así.

—La noticia se ha extendido por toda la ciudad y puede perjudicar ni reputación. No pienses que todo el mundo es partidario tuyo. Yo he hecho lo que he podido para silenciar ese rumor.

—No te molestes. Miss Quested se ha marchado ya definitivamente.

—Esa historia perjudica a quienes se quedan en este país, no a los que se marchan. Imagina mi consternación y mi ansiedad. No he logrado apenas conciliar el sueño. Primero se unió mi nombre al de ella y ahora ha sido el tuyo.

—No es preciso que uses esas expresiones tan exageradas.

—¿Como cuáles?

—Como consternación y ansiedad.

—¿No he vivido toda la vida en la India? ¿Crees que no sé qué cosas producen aquí una mala impresión? Su voz se alzó, bastante malhumorada.

—Sí, pero se trata de un problema de proporción. Siempre te pasas en estas cosas, mi querido amigo. Es una pena que exista ese rumor, pero tiene tan poca importancia que podemos perfectamente hablar de otra cosa.

—Pero sí que te importa por Miss Quested. Se te nota en la cara.

—En la medida en que me importa. Ya sabes que viajo ligero de equipaje.

—Cyril, esa jactancia tuya sobre viajar ligero de equipaje será tu ruina. Te está creando enemigos por todas partes y hace que me sienta terriblemente preocupado.

—¿Qué enemigos?

Como Aziz pensaba sólo en sí mismo, no pudo responderle. Sentirse completamente estúpido le hizo enfadarse aún más.

—Te he dado una lista tras otra de personas de esta ciudad de las que hay que desconfiar. En tu posición, yo tendría el suficiente sentido común para saberme rodeado de enemigos. Te darás cuenta de que hablo en voz baja. Es porque veo que tu *sais* es nuevo. ¿Cómo sé que no es un espía? —Aziz bajó aún más la voz—. De cada tres criados, uno es un espía.

—Pero vamos a ver, ¿qué es lo que pasa? —preguntó Fielding, sonriendo.

—¿Niegas mi última observación?

—Sucede, simplemente, que a mí no me afecta. Hay tantos espías como mosquitos, pero todavía tendrán que pasar años antes de que me tropiece con uno que logre matarme. A ti te preocupa algo distinto.

—Claro que no; no seas ridículo.

—Sí que te preocupa. Estás enfadado conmigo por algo. Cualquier ataque directo dejaba indefenso a Aziz.

—De manera que Mademoiselle Adela y tú os divertíais juntos por las noches, sinvergonzón —dijo acto seguido.

La anterior conversación, tan llena de frases desinteresadas y repetitivas, difícilmente podía haber preparado a Fielding para aquella súbita aparición de la frivolidad. El Director del Instituto se sorprendió

tanto de que se tomara la historia en serio y le molestó tanto oírse llamar sinvergonzón, que perdió la cabeza y exclamó:

—¡Tú si que estás hecho un sinvergüenza! ¡Que me aspen si lo entiendo! ¡Nada menos que diversión! ¿Te parece que es lo normal en semejante momento?

—Te ruego que me perdones. Lo siento mucho. Una vez más se ha puesto en marcha la licenciosa imaginación oriental —replicó Aziz, hablando alegremente, pero herido en lo más hondo; durante horas después de su error siguió sangrando interiormente.

—Tienes que darte cuenta de Tas circunstancias…, la chica seguía prometida con Heaslop, y además nunca sentí…

—Claro, claro; pero como no negabas lo que yo decía, creí que era verdad. ¡Cielo santo, Oriente y Occidente! ¡Qué engañoso resulta todo! ¿Tendrás inconveniente en llevar a este sinvergüenza a su hospital?

—¿No te habrás ofendido?

—Naturalmente que no.

—Si te has ofendido, esto tenemos que aclararlo después.

—Está todo aclarado —respondió Aziz, lleno de dignidad—. Estoy completamente seguro de que dices la verdad, y no nace falta darle más vueltas a ese punto.

—Pero tengo que disculparme por la forma de decirlo. Me he mostrado grosero sin querer. Te ruego que me perdones.

—Soy yo quien tiene toda la culpa.

Confusiones como ésta seguían interrumpiendo su comunicación. Una pausa en el sitio equivocado, una entonación que se malimerpretaba eran suficientes para echar a perder toda una conversación. Fielding se había sorprendido, no molestado; pero ¿cómo hacer ver la diferencia? Siempre surgen problemas cuando dos personas no piensan en el sexo al mismo tiempo, en seguida aparecen el resentimiento mutuo y la sorpresa, incluso cuando los dos son de la misma raza. Fielding empezó a recapitular sus sentimientos acerca de Miss Quested Aziz le interrumpió con:

—Pero si yo te creo, no tengo la menor duda. Mohammed Latif será duramente castigado por inventar esa patraña.

—Déjalo tranquilo; como todos los rumores, no es mas que una de esas cosas medio vivas que intentan desbancar a la gas caso y desaparecerá, como las tumbas de la pobre Mrs. Moore.

—Mohammed Latif se ha aficionado a las intrigas. Estamos muy disgustados con él. ¿Te sentirías satisfecho si lo devolviéramos a su familia sin un presente?

—Hablaremos de M. L. durante la cena.

Los ojos de Aziz se ensombrecieron.

—Qué mala suerte…, lo había olvidado. He prometido cenar con Das.

—Trae a Das contigo.

—Habrá invitado a otros amigos.

—Vas a venir a cenar conmigo como habíamos acordado —dijo Fielding, mirando en otra dirección—. No soporto esto. Vas a venir a cenar conmigo. Tienes que venir.

Ya habían llegado al hospital para entonces. Fielding dio una vuelta por el Maidan a solas. Estaba descontento de sí mismo, pero confiaba en la cena para enderezar las cosas. En la oficina de correos vio al Administrador. Sus vehículos quedaron estacionados uno al lado del otro, mientras sus criados se hacían la competencia en el interior del edificio.

—Buenos días; así que ya está usted de vuelta —dijo Turton-con helada entonación—. Me gustaría que hiciera acto de presencia por el Club esta tarde.

—He aceptado ser readmitido, como usted sabe. ¿Considerara también necesario que vaya? Preferiría no tener que asistir; en realidad he invitado a cenar a unos amigos.

—No se trata de lo que usted prefiera, sino de los deseos del Vicegobernador. Quizá me pregunte usted si hablo oficialmente. Así es. Le espero a las seis. No trastornaremos los planes que tenga usted para después.

Fielding asistió a la desagradable ceremonia a su debido tiempo. Todos los gestos de hospitalidad resultaban chirriantes.

—¿No quiere algo de beber? Tómese una copa.

El Director del Instituto habló durante cinco minutos con Mrs. Blakiston, la única mujer superviviente. Habló también con McBryde, que se mostraba desafiante acerca de su divorcio, consciente de que había pecado como un *sahib*. Conversó con el Mayor Roberts, el nuevo Cirujano-Jefe; y con el joven Milner, nuevo Magistrado Municipal; pero cuanto más cambiaba el club mas prometía seguir siendo la misma cosa. «No sirve de nada», pensó Fielding ya de vuelta, después de dejar atrás la mezquita, «todos construimos sobre arena, y cuanto más se modernice el país, peor será la caída. En el siglo dieciocho, cuando reinaban la crueldad y la injusticia, un poder invisible reparaba los destrozos. Ahora todo encuentra eco, y no hay forma de detener el eco. Quizás el sonido original sea inofensivo, pero el eco siempre está lleno de maldad». Esta reflexión acerca de un eco ocupaba siempre un segundo término en la mente de Fielding. Nunca era capaz de desarrollarla. Pertenecía al universo en el que no había logrado entrar o que había rechazado. Tampoco la mezquita lograba penetrar. Al igual que él, aquellos arcos sin profundidad proporcionaban un refugio muy limitado. «No hay más Dios que Dios», no nos lleva muy lejos a través de las complejidades de la materia y del espíritu; en realidad no es más que un juego de palabras, un retruécano religioso, no una verdad religiosa.

Fielding encontró a Aziz muy cansado y decaído, y decidió no aludir al malentendido entre ellos hasta el final de la velada; para entonces resultaría ya un tema más aceptable. El Director del Instituto se sinceró completamente sobre el club: dijo que había ido obligado y que nunca volvería allí a no ser que se lo ordenaran de nuevo.

—En otras palabras, nunca probablemente, porque voy a irme muy pronto a Inglaterra.

—Ya se me había ocurrido que podías acabar allí —dijo Aziz con mucha calma, cambiando inmediatamente de conversación.

Cenaron en una atmósfera de considerable desasosiego y luego fueron a sentarse en el pabellón del jardín.

—Me quedaré poco tiempo en Inglaterra. Se trata de un viaje oficial. Mi departamento está ansioso de sacarme de Chandrapore por una temporada.

Están obligados a considerarme persona valiosa, pero Ies resulto más bien molesto. Es una situación divertida, hasta cierto punto.

—¿Qué clases de asuntos tienes que resolver? ¿Te dejarán mucho tiempo libre?

—Lo bastante para ver a mis amigos.

—Esperaba que me respondieras eso. Eres un amigo fiel. ¿Te parece que hablemos ahora de otra cosa?

—Con mucho gusto. ¿Qué tema propones?

—Poesía —dijo Aziz, con lágrimas en los ojos—. Consideremos por qué la poesía ha perdido el poder dé hacer valientes a los nombres. Mi abuelo materno también era poeta, y luchó contra vosotros en la revolución de los cipayos. Podría igualarme con él si hubiera otra revuelta. Pero, tal como están las cosas, no soy más que un médico que ha ganado un proceso y tiene tres hijos que mantener y cuyo principal tema de conversación son los planes oficiales.

—Hablemos de poesía. —Fielding centró su atención en aquel tema inofensivo—. Vosotros, los indios, os encontráis en unas circunstancias muy tristes. ¿Sobre qué podrías escribir? No puedes repetir eternamente «La rosa se ha marchitado*. Ya sabemos que está marchita. Pero tampoco puedes dedicarte a la poesía patriótica del tipo «India mía, mi India», cuando en realidad la India no es de nadie.

—Me gusta esta conversación. Puede conducirnos a algo interesante.

—Tienes toda la razón al pensar que la poesía debe estar en contacto con la vida. Cuanto te conocí la usabas como sortilegio.

—No era más que un niño cuando me conociste. Todo el mundo era mi amigo entonces. El Amigo: una expresión persa para designar a Dios. Pero ya he dejado de ser poeta religioso.

—Tenía la esperanza de que siguieras siéndolo.

—¿Por qué, siendo tú ateo?

—Hay algo en la religión que quizá no sea cierto, pero que nadie ha cantado todavía.

—Explícalo con más detalle.

—Algo que quizá los hindúes sí han encontrado.

—Entonces que sean ellos quienes lo canten.

—Los hindúes no saben cantar.

—Cyril, de vez en cuando haces observaciones razonables. Por el momento ya hemos hablado bastante de poesía. Volvamos a tu visita a Inglaterra.

—No hemos dedicado ni dos segundos a la poesía —dijo el otro, sonriendo.

Pero a Aziz le gustaban mucho las piezas breves. Podía abarcar aquella conversación con la palma de la mano y sentir que compendiaba su problema. Por un instante recordó a su mujer y, como sucede cuando un recuerdo es intenso, el pasado se convirtió en el ¡futuro, y se vio con ella en un tranquilo Estado de la jungla, muy lejos de cualquier extranjero.

—Imagino que irás a visitar a Miss Quested —dijo.

—Si tengo tiempo. Resultará extraño verla en Hampstead.

—¿Qué es Hampstead?

—Un pequeño barrio residencial de Londres donde viven artistas e intelectuales…

—Y Miss Quested vive allí confortablemente; disfrutarás con la visita… Vaya, ¡cómo me duele la cabeza! Quizá vaya yo también a tener el cólera. Con tu permiso me retiraré pronto.

—¿A qué hora querrás el coche?

—No te molestes; volveré en bicicleta.

—Pero si no has traído bicicleta. Mi coche te fue a buscar y lo normal es que te devuelva a casa.

—Parece razonable —dijo Aziz, tratando de mostrarse alegre—. Es cierto que no he traído bicicleta, pero se me ve con demasiada frecuencia en tu coche. Mr. Ram Chand piensa que me aprovecho de tu generosidad.

El joven médico se sentía de malhumor e incómodo. La conversación saltaba de un tema a otro de manera desganada. Ambos se mostraban afectuosos y deseosos de intimidad, pero nada terminaba de encajar.

—Aziz, ¿me has perdonado el estúpido comentario que hice esta mañana?

—¿Cuando me llamaste sinvergüenza?

—Sí, para eterna confusión mía. Sabes el mucho afecto que te tengo.

—No tiene importancia, por supuesto; todos cometemos errores. En una amistad como la nuestra unos deslices no significan nada.

Pero más tarde, mientras volvía a su casa, Aziz se sentía deprimido por aleo: un dolor sordo del cuerpo o de la mente, que esperaba para salir a la superficie. Cuando llegó a su bungalow sintió deseos de volver junto a Fielding y decirle alguna frase afectuosa; pero en lugar de hacerlo le dio una fuerte propina al *sais* y se sentó apesadumbrado en la cama, donde Hassan le dio un masaje muy incompetente. Las moscas habían colonizado la parte superior de una *almeira*, y las manchas rojas en la alfombra de algodón eran más perceptibles que nunca, porque Mohammed Latif había dormido en la casa mientras Aziz estuvo en la cárcel, y escupía con mucha frecuencia; el cajón de la mesa conservaba las huellas dejadas por la policía al forzarlo; en Chandrapore todo estaba agotado, incluido el aire. Lo que le preocupaba terminó saliendo a la superficie: Aziz tenía sospechas; sospechaba que su amigo se proponía casarse con Miss Quested por su dinero y que volvía a Inglaterra con ese propósito.

—¿*Huzoor*? —le preguntó el criado, porque Aziz había murmurado algo.

—Mira esas moscas en el techo. ¿Por qué no las has ahogado?

—Es que vuelven, *huzoor*.

—Como todos los males.

Para desviar la conversación, Hassan contó que el pinché había matado una serpiente, cosa buena, pero la había matado cortándola en dos, cosa mala, porque los pedazos se convierten en dos culebras.

—Cuando se rompe un plato, ¿se convierten los trozos en dos platos?

—También harán falta vasos y una nueva tetera; y una chaqueta para mí.

Aziz suspiró. Cada uno para sí mismo. Un hombre necesita una chaqueta, otro una esposa rica; cada uno se acerca a la meta deseada mediante un hábil rodeo. Fielding le había ahorrado a la chica una multa de veinte mil rupias y ahora iba a Inglaterra detrás de ella. Si deseaba casarse todo quedaba explicado: Miss Quested llevaría una dote importante al

matrimonio. Aziz no creía en sus propias sospechas, pero hubiera hecho mejor aceptándolas, porque entonces las habría denunciado, aclarándose la situación. Sospecha y fe en el amigo podían coexistir en su mente sin problemas. Surgían de fuentes distintas y no tenían por qué mezclarse. En el oriental la sospecha es una especie de tumor maligno, una enfermedad mental que le hace perder la naturalidad y le vuelve hostil de repente; confía y desconfía al mismo tiempo de una manera que el occidental no es capaz de comprender. Es su espíritu maligno, como lo es la hipocresía para el occidental. Aziz se dejó dominar por ella y su fantasía construyó un castillo satánico, cuyos cimientos habían sido colocados la noche en que Fielding y él hablaron en Dilkusha bajo las estrellas. Sin duda, Miss Quested había sido la amante de Cyril mientras permaneció en el Instituto… Mohammed Latif estaba en lo cierto. Pero ¿era eso todo? Quizá fue Cyril quien la siguió al interior de la cueva… No; imposible. Cyril no había estado en el Kawa Dol. Imposible. Ridículo. Sin embargo, aquellas fantasías le dejaban temblando de dolor. Semejante traición —caso de ser cierta— habría sido la peor de la historia india; imposible mayor vileza, ni siquiera el asesinato de Afzul Khan por Sivaji[16]. Aziz se sintió tan anonadado como «hubiera confirmado la verdad de sus sospechas, y le dijo a Hassan que se marchara.

Al día siguiente, el joven médico decidió llevar otra vez a sus hijos a Mussoorie. Habían venido de la zona montañosa para el juicio, con el fin de que Aziz pudiera despedirse de ellos, y se habían quedado en casa de Hamiaullah para las celebraciones. El Mayor Roberts le daría permiso para marcharse y Fielding saldría camino de Inglaterra durante su ausencia. La idea se acomodaba por igual a sus sospechas y a sus creencias. Los acontecimientos demostrarían dónde se hallaba la verdad, y en cualquiera de los dos casos pondría a salvo su dignidad.

Fielding era consciente de algo hostil, y como realmente quería mucho a Aziz, su optimismo le falló. Viajar ligero de equipaje no resultaba tan fácil cuando entran en juego los afectos. Incapaz de seguir adelante con la serena esperanza de que al final todo se arreglaría, Fielding escribió una carta muy pensada y en estilo mis bien moderno:

«Tengo la impresión de que me consideras puritano en lo que a mujeres se refiere. Preferiría que pensaras cualquier otra cosa de mí. Si ahora vivo castamente es por haber pasado ya de los cuarenta y estar en periodo de revisión. Cuando llegue a los ochenta haré una nueva revisión. Y antes de los noventa… ¡seré yo el revisado! Pero, vivo o muerto, carezco completamente de moral. Me gustaría que no tuvieras una opinión equivocada de mí.»

A Aziz le desagradó la carta, que hería su delicadeza. Apreciaba las confidencias, por muy vulgares que fuesen, pero siempre le repelían las generalizaciones y las comparaciones. La vida no es un manual científico. Contestó fríamente, lamentando no poder regresar de Mussooire antes de que su amigo se embarcara: «Pero tengo que tomarme unas modestas vacaciones ahora que puedo. De aquí en adelante todo será economizar; las esperanzas de Cachemira se han esfumado para siempre jamás. Cuando regreses estaré trabajando como un esclavo en un nuevo puesto.»

Fielding se marchó, y durante los últimos calores de Chandrapore —cuando el cielo y la tierra parecían tener consistencia de melcochas— las peores fantasías del médico indio se vieron confirmadas. Sus amigos las fomentaron, porque, si bien les gustaba el Director del Instituto, se sentían incómodos ante la idea de que llegara a saber demasiado sobre sus asuntos privados. Mahmoud Ali declaró en seguida que la traición estaba en marcha.

—Es cierto que últimamente ya no nos dirigía la palabra con su antigua franqueza —murmuró Hamidullah; y le advirtió a Aziz «que no esperara demasiado; después de todo, él y ella son miembros de otra raza».

«¿Dónde están mis veinte mil rupias?», pensó Aziz. El dinero no le interesaba en absoluto —no sólo era generoso, sino que pagaba sus deudas con prontitud cuando se acordaba de hacerlo—, pero aquellas rupias le obsesionaban, porque le habían engañado y había permitido que se escaparan al extranjero, como gran parte de la riqueza de la India. Cyril se casaría con Miss Quested; Aziz terminó convencido de ello, con la ayuda de todo lo que había quedado sin explicación en el asunto de las Colinas de Marabar. Era la conclusión natural de aquella horrible excursión sin sentido,

y antes de que pasara mucho tiempo no le cupo ninguna duda de que la boda era ya un hecho consumado.

Capítulo trigésimo segundo

Egipto era encantador: una estrecha alfombra verde, y andando por ella, arriba y abajo, cuatro especies de animales y una de hombres. Los asuntos de Fielding le retuvieron allí algunos días.

Se embarcó de nuevo en Alejandría: radiante cielo azul, brisa incesante y una costa baja y nítida en contraste con el complicado relieve de Bombay.

Creta le dio después la bienvenida con sus largas cordilleras nevadas, y más tarde Venecia. Al desembarcar en la Piazzeta le fue ofrecida una auténtica copa de belleza, y Fielding bebió en ella con cierto sentimiento de deslealtad. Los edificios de Venecia, como las montañas de Creta y los campos de Egipto, estaban situados en el lugar adecuado, mientras que en la pobre India todo se hallaba mal puesto. ¿Había olvidado la belleza de la forma entre templos repletos de ídolos y colinas desproporcionadas? ¿Cómo podía haber belleza donde faltaba la forma? La forma balbucía aquí y allá en una mezquita, perdía incluso flexibilidad debido al nerviosismo; pero ¡aquellas iglesias italianas! ¡San Giorgio alzándose sobre una isla que sin ella difícilmente hubiera podido surgir de las olas! ¡Santa María della Salute guardando la entrada de un canal que sin ella no sería el Gran Canal! En sus días de estudiante se había arropado con la capa multicolor de San Marcos, pero ahora se le ofrecía algo aún más precioso que mosaicos y mármoles: la armonía entre las obras del hombre y la tierra que las sostiene, la cultura

que ha evitado la confusión, el espíritu en una forma razonable, en la que perduran carne y sangre. Al mandar postales a sus amigos indios, Fielding comprendió que ninguno apreciaría los placeres que él experimentaba en aquel momento, la alegría de la forma, y que ello constituía un serio obstáculo en sus relaciones.

Sus amigos indios verían la suntuosidad de Venecia, no su forma, y aunque Venecia no fuese Europa, formaba parte de la armonía mediterránea.

El Mediterráneo es la norma humana. Cuando los hombres abandonan ese lago exquisito, ya sea a través del Bósforo o de las Columnas de Hércules, se encaminan hacia lo monstruoso y lo extraordinario, y la salida meridional lleva a la mas extraña de todas las experiencias. Volviéndole una vez mas la espalda, Fielding tomó el tren con dirección al Norte, y tiernas y románticas fantasías que ya creía muertas para siempre florecieron nuevamente cuando contempló extasiado los botones de oro y las margaritas del mes de junio.

TERCERA PARTE

TEMPLO

Capítulo trigésimo tercero

Unos cientos de millas al oeste de las Colinas de Marabar, y dos años después, el profesor Naravan Godbole está de píe en la presencia de Dios. Dios no ha nacido todavía —eso sucederá a medianoche—, pero también nació hace muchos siglos, y en realidad Dios no puede nacer nunca, porque es el Señor del Universo, que trasciende todos los procesos humanos. Dios es, no era, no es, era. El y el profesor Godbole se hallaban en los extremos opuestos de la misma tira de alfombra.

Tukaram, Tukaram, Tú eres mi padre y mi madre y todo el mundo.
Tukaram, Tukaram, Tú eres mi padre y mi madre y todo el mundo.
Tukaram, Tukaram, Tú eres mi padre y mi madre y todo el mundo.
Tukaram, Tukaram, Tú eres mi padre y mi madre y todo el mundo.
Tukaram, Tukaram, Tú eres mi padre y mi madre y todo el mundo.
Tukaram…

El corredor del palacio de Mau desembocaba a través de otros corredores en un hermoso patio de estuco blanco, pero apenas era posible ver sus pilares y sus bóvedas, ocultos detrás de trapos de colores, globos tornasolados, arañas de cristal opaco de color rosa y oscuras fotografías con el marco torcido. Al final estaba el pequeño pero famoso santuario del culto dinástico, y el Dios que había de nacer era básicamente una imagen de plata

del tamaño de un* cucharilla. Los hindúes se sentaban a ambos lados de la alfombra allí donde encontraban sitio, o se desparramaban por los corredores próximos y por el patio: hindúes, sólo hindúes, nombres de facciones suaves, aldeanos en su mayor parte, para quienes cualquier cosa de sus pueblos se convertía en parte de un sueño, trabajadores del campo a quienes algunos llaman la India verdadera. Mezclados con ellos se hallaban algunos comerciantes de la ciudad, funcionarios, cortesanos, vástagos de la casa reinante. Alumnos del Instituto local mantenían el orden de manera muy poco eficiente. La asamblea se encontraba en un estado de felicidad y ternura desconocido para una multitud inglesa, y bullía como una poción benéfica. Cuando los aldeanos rompían el cordón para lanzar una ojeada a la imagen de plata, aparecía en su rostro una expresión increíblemente hermosa y radiante, de una belleza en la que no había nada personal, porque hacía que todos se parecieran mientras tomaba posesión de ellos, y sólo cuando desaparecía volvían a su rústica individualidad. E igualmente con la música. Había música, pero surgía de tantas fuentes que la suma total carecía de límites. Los rebuznos, golpes y canturreos se fundían en una masa única que se arrastraba por todo el palacio antes de unirse a los truenos. Llovía a intervalos a lo largo de la noche.

Le tocaba el turno al coro del profesor Godbole. Había logrado este honor especial como Ministro de Educación. Cuando el anterior grupo de cantantes se dispersó entre la multitud, él avanzó desde atrás, cantando ya a pleno volumen, para que no se interrumpiera la cadena de sonidos sagrados. Godbole iba descalzo y vestido de blanco, con un turbante de color azul pálido; sus quevedos de oro se habían enganchado en una guirnalda de jazmines, ladeándose sobre su nariz. Él y los seis colegas que le acompañaban entrechocaban címbalos, golpeaban pequeños tambores, producían un sonido monótono mediante un armonio portátil y cantaban:

Tukaram, Tukaram, Tú eres mi padre y mi madre y todo el mundo.
Tukaram, Tukaram, Tú eres mi padre y mi madre y todo el mundo.
Tukaram, Tukaram…

No cantaban siquiera al Dios que estaba frente a ellos, sino a un santo; no hacían ni una sola cosa que los no hindúes pudieran aceptar como dramáticamente correcta; aquel triunfo de la India que estaba a punto de producirse era (desde nuestro punto de vista) una pura confusión, algo completamente desprovisto de razón y de forma.;Dónde estaba el Dios en cuyo honor se había reunido aquella muchedumbre? Resultaba imposible distinguirlo entre la mezcolanza de su propio altar, acurrucado hasta perderse de vista entre imágenes de inferior categoría, asfixiado bajo pétalos de rosa, con demasiadas oleografías colgando sobre su cabeza, reducido a insignificancia por las placas doradas que reproducían a los antepasados del raja, y completamente oscurecido, cuando soplaba el viento, por el andrajoso follaje de un plátano. En su honor se habían encendido cientos de luces eléctricas (alimentadas por un motor cuyas violentas convulsiones destruían el ritmo de la canción). Sin embargo, era imposible ver su rostro. Cientos de sus bandejas de plata se apilaban a su alrededor con el mínimo efecto posible. Las inscripciones compuestas por los poetas de! Estado colgaban donde no podían leerse, o habían hecho saltar las tachuelas que las sujetaban al estuco, y una de ellas (redactada en inglés para indicar su universalidad) estaba formada, debido a un desafortunado desliz del dibujante, por las palabras: «Dios se Amor.» Dios se Amor. ¿Es éste el mensaje definitivo de la India?

Tukaram, Tukaram.…,

continuó el coro, reforzado por una disputa detrás de la cortina del *purdab*, donde dos madres trataban de colocar a sus hijos al mismo tiempo en primera fila. La pierna de una niñita salió proyectada como una anguila. En el patio, empapados por la lluvia, los componentes de una pequeña orquestina europeizada se encontraron de pronto tocando un vals. *Noches de júbilo* era lo que interpretaban. Los cantantes no se inmutaron por la aparición de aquel competidor, porque para ellos no existía la rivalidad. Pasó mucho tiempo antes de que el minúsculo fragmento del profesor Godbole que se ocupaba de las realidades externas decidiera que sus quevedos estaban en peligro y que mientras no se los ajustara no podría elegir un nuevo himno. Depositó un címbalo en el suelo sin dejar de golpear

el aire con el otro, y con la mano libre movió torpemente las flores que llevaba alrededor del cuello. Un colega le ayudó. Sin dejar de cantar —un bigote gris muy cerca de otro— separaron la cadena de los quevedos del hilo de oro con el que se había enredado. Godbole consultó el libro de música, dijo unas palabras al tamborilero, quien, quebrando el ritmo, produjo una breve y confusa sucesión de rápidos sonidos antes de pasar a un nuevo ritmo, que resultó ser más excitante, más claras las imágenes interiores que evocaba, y en el rostro de los cantantes apareció una expresión distante y lánguida. Amaban a todos los hombres, a todo el universo, y fragmentos de su pasado, detalles insignificantes, surgían por un momento para fundirse luego en el calor universal. Así Godbole, aunque aquella persona no tuviera importancia para él, se acordó de una anciana mujer que había conocido en sus días de Chandrapore. La casualidad la trajo a su mente mientras se hallaba en aquel estado de acaloramiento; él no la eligió: ella se presentó entre el cúmulo de imágenes importunas —fragmento insignificante— y Godbole la empujó, mediante su fuerza espiritual, al lugar donde es posible hallar la integridad. Integridad, no reconstrucción. Sus sentidos se debilitaron, Godbole recordó una avispa contemplada en algún sitio que había olvidado, quizá sobre una piedra. El profesor amó a la, avispa con la misma fuerza, empujándola con la misma intensidad, imitando a Dios. Y la piedra a la que la avispa se agarraba…, podía él quizá…, no, no podía, se había equivocado al intentarlo con la piedra; la lógica y un esfuerzo consciente habían logrado seducirle. Godbole volvió a la tira de alfombra roja para descubrir que estaba bailando sobre ella. Arriba y abajo, un tercio del recorrido hasta el altar y de nuevo en la dirección contraria, haciendo entrechocar los címbalos, moviendo rápidamente sus piernecillas, y sus compañeros bailando con él y entre ellos. Ruido, ruido, la orquestina europeizada tocando cada vez más fuerte, incienso en el altar, sudor, el resplandor de las luces, el viento en los plátanos, ruido, truenos, las doce menos diez según su reloj de pulsera, visto al alzar las manos y separar la diminuta reverberación que era su alma. Gritos más fuertes entre la multitud. Godbole siguió bailando. Los muchachos y los hombres acuclillados en los pasillos fueron alzados a la

fuerza y depositados sin modificar su postura sobre los regazos de sus vecinos. Por la senda así conseguida avanzó una litera.

Era el anciano Soberano del Estado, traído contra la opinión de sus médicos para presenciar la ceremonia del Nacimiento.

Nadie saludó al Rajá, que tampoco lo deseaba; no era momento para la gloria humana, como tampoco podía depositarse la litera en el suelo, no fuera a profanar el templo convirtiéndose en trono. El Rajá fue alzado en el aire y colocado sobre la alfombra cerca del altar, luego le enderezaron la inmensa barba, le sentaron sobre sus propias piernas y le dejaron en la mano un papel que contenía polvo rojo. Allí se quedó, apoyado contra un pilar, agotado por la enfermedad, los ojos agrandados por las muchas lágrimas no derramadas.

El soberano no tuvo que esperar demasiado. En un país donde todo lo demás pecaba de impuntualidad, la hora del Nacimiento se respetaba cronológicamente. Tres minutos antes del momento exacto, un brahmán trajo una maqueta de la aldea de Gokul (el Belén de aquella nebulosa historia) y lo colocó delante del altar. La maqueta se hallaba sobre una bandeja de madera de una yarda cuadrada aproximadamente; era de arcilla, y de alegres colores azules y blancos gracias a las banderolas y a la pintura. A un lado, en una silla demasiado pequeña para él y con una cabeza demasiado grande, aparecía el rey Kansa, que representa a Herodes, dirigiendo la matanza de algunos inocentes; en un rincón, y de proporciones similares, se hallaban el padre y la madre del Señor, avisados mediante un sueño de la necesidad de partir. La maqueta no era un objeto sagrado, pero tenía más valor que una simple decoración, porque apartaba a los hombres de la verdadera imagen del dios y aumentaba su santa perplejidad. Algunos de los aldeanos pensaban que el Nacimiento ya se había producido, diciendo con razón que el Señor tenía que haber nacido: de lo contrario, ellos no podrían verlo. Pero el reloj dio las campanadas de la medianoche y simultáneamente estalló la nota desgarradora de la trompa de caracol, seguida del barritar de los elefantes; todos los que tenían paquetes de polvo los arrojaron sobre el altar, y en medio del polvo rojo y del incienso, de los gritos y el estruendo de los instrumentos musicales, el Amor Infinito tomó

como propia la forma de SHRI KRISHNA y salvó al mundo. Todos los sufrimientos quedaron aniquilados no sólo para los indios, sino para los extranjeros, los pájaros, las cuevas, los ferrocarriles y las estrellas; todo se convirtió en alegría y en risas; nunca había existido la enfermedad, ni la duda, ni los malentendidos, ni la crueldad, ni el miedo. Algunos de los presentes saltaron por el aire, otros se arrojaron al suelo y abrazaron los pies descalzos del amante universal; las mujeres detrás del *purdah* dieron palmadas y chillaron; la niñita salió de detrás de la cortina y bailó sola, las oscuras trenzas ondeando tras ella. No se trataba de una orgía del cuerpo; la tradición del santuario lo prohibía. Pero el espíritu humano había tratado —mediante una desesperada contorsión— de apoderarse por la fuerza de lo desconocido, prescindiendo en la lucha de la ciencia y de la historia, sí, y también de la misma belleza. ¿Lo había conseguido? Libros escritos posteriormente dicen «Sí». Pero ¿cómo, si se produce tal acontecimiento, puede recordarse después? ¿Cómo puede expresarse con algo que no sea él mismo? Los misterios no sólo quedan ocultos para el no creyente, sino que tampoco el mismo adepto puede retenerlos. Puede pensar, si así lo decide, que ha estado con Dios, pero, tan pronto como lo piensa, el recuerdo se convierte en historia y cae bajo las reglas del tiempo.

En seguida apareció sobre la alfombra una cobra de cartón piedra, y también una cuna de madera colgada de un bastidor. El profesor Godbole se acercó a esta última llevando en brazos un pañal rojo de seda. El pañal era Dios, aunque no lo era en realidad, y la imagen continuaba escondida entre la confusión del altar. No era más que un pañal, doblado de forma que indicase la presencia de un niño. El profesor lo meció y se lo entregó al Rajá, quien, haciendo un gran esfuerzo, dijo:

—Doy a este niño el nombre de Shri Krishna.

Después lo dejó caer en la cuna.

Las lágrimas brotaron incontenibles en los ojos del anciano monarca porque había visto la salvación del Señor. Estaba demasiado débil para mostrar a su pueblo el niño de seda, como había sido privilegio suyo en años anteriores. Sus acompañantes lo alzaron de nuevo, volvió a abrirse un camino entre la multitud y el Raja fue trasladado a otra parte menos sagrada

del palacio. Allí, en una habitación accesible a la ciencia occidental por una escalera exterior, le aguardaba su médico, el doctor Aziz. Su médico hindú, que había acompañado al santuario, informó brevemente sobre sus síntomas.

Al desaparecer el embelesamiento, el enfermo empezó a dar muestras de desasosiego. El traqueteo de la máquina de vapor que alimentaba la dinamo le perturbaba, y preguntó por qué razón había sido introducida en su hogar. Los que estaban con él respondieron que lo preguntarían, y le fue administrado un sedante.

Debajo, en los corredores sagrados, la alegría había dado paso al jolgorio. Era deber de los presentes participar en varios juegos para divertir al Dios recién nacido y simular sus escarceos amorosos con las sensuales pastoras de Brindaban. En estos juegos la mantequilla desempeñaba un papel muy destacado. Una vez retirada la cuna, los principales nobles del Estado se reunieron para retozar inocentemente. Todos se quitaron el turbante, uno de ellos se colocó una pella de mantequilla en la frente y esperó a que se deslizara nariz abajo hasta llegar a la boca. Pero antes de que pudiera llegar, otro de los participantes se situó sigilosamente detrás de él, se apoderó del bocado a punto de derretirse y se lo tragó. Todos los espectadores rieron exultantes al descubrir que el sentido divino del humor coincidía con el suyo, «¡Dios se Amor!» Hay diversión en el cielo. Dios puede gastarse bromas pesadas a Sí mismo, quitarse la silla debajo de Su propio trasero, prender fuego a Su propio turbante y robarse Su propia ropa interior cuando se baña. Al sacrificar el buen gusto, estas devociones lograban lo que el cristianismo ha evitado: incluir la diversión. Todo el espíritu, al igual que toda la materia, tiene que participar en la salvación y si se suprimen las bromas pesadas el círculo queda incompleto. Después de tragarse la mantequilla, los participantes iniciaron otro juego que por casualidad resultó donairoso: las caricias a Shri Krishna bajo la apariencia de un niño. Se lanza una bonita pelota roja y oro y el que se apodera de ella elige a un niño entre la multitud, lo alza entre sus brazos y lo va llevando por todo el recinto para ser acariciado. Todo el mundo lo hace por amor al Creador, murmurando palabras de alegría. El niño es devuelto a sus padres,

vuelve a lanzarse la pelota y otro niño se convierte por un momento en el Deseado del Mundo. Y el Señor salta de aquí para allá a través de los corredores y utiliza la casualidad, y el juego de la casualidad, para irradiar Su inmortalidad a los pequeños mortales… Cuando hubieron jugado el tiempo suficiente —y al no afectarles el aburrimiento lo repitieron una y otra vez, una y otra vez—, las personas principales tomaron muchas varas y las golpearon entre sí, haciendo un ruido muy fuerte, como si estuvieran peleando en las guerras de los Pandavas[17], y se agitaron y revolvieron con ellas, y después colgaron del techo del templo, en una red, una gran vasija negra de barro, que estaba pintada de rojo aquí y allá, y enguirnaldada con higos secos. Entonces llegó el momento de un juego muy estimulante. Saltando, golpearon la vasija con sus varas.

El cántaro se quebró, terminó rompiéndose y una masa de leche y arroz grasiento se derramó sobre sus rostros. Comieron y se untaron la boca unos a otros, y se zambulleron entre las piernas de los demás para coger lo que había caído sobre la alfombra. Por todas partes se extendía la divina mezcolanza, hasta que los alumnos del instituto local, que hasta cierto punto habían mantenido a raya a la multitud, abandonaron sus puestos para tomar parte en el sagrado festín. Los corredores, el patio, se llenaron de afable confusión. También las moscas se despertaron, reclamando su parte en la dádiva de Dios. No había peleas, debido a la naturaleza del regalo, porque bienaventurado es el hombre que se lo otorga a otro, imitando así a Dios. Y estas «imitaciones», estas «sustituciones» siguieron aleteando por la asamblea durante muchas horas, despertando en cada hombre, de acuerdo con su capacidad, una emoción que no hubiera conocido de otra manera. No sobrevivía ninguna imagen definida; en el Nacimiento era discutible si lo que había venido al mundo era una muñeca de plata, una maqueta de barro, un pañal de seda, un espíritu impalpable o una piadosa resolución. ¡Quizá todas esas cosas! ¡Quizá ninguna! ¡Quizá todo nacimiento es una alegoría! Sin embargo, era el principal acontecimiento del año religioso y causaba extraños pensamientos. Cubierto de grasa y polvo, el profesor Godbole había desarrollado una vez más la vida de su espíritu. Había visto de nuevo a Mrs. Moore con mayor nitidez, y en torno suyo formas de aflicción

vagamente adheridas a ella. El era un brahmán y ella cristiana, pero eso no suponía ninguna diferencia; daba lo mismo que se tratase de una mala jugada de su memoria o de una súplica telepática. Era su deber y su deseo ponerse en el lugar de Dios y amarla; y, al mismo tiempo, ponerse en el lugar de la anciana señora y decirle a Dios: «Ven, ven. ven, ven.» Eso era todo lo que él podía hacer. ¡Qué insuficiente! Pero cada uno según su propia capacidad, y Godbole sabía que la suya era muy limitada. «Una anciana inglesa y una avispa muy pequeña», pensó mientras salía del templo a una húmeda mañana gris de lluvia incesante. «No parece mucho y, sin embargo, es más de lo que soy yo.»

Capítulo trigésimo cuarto

El doctor Aziz abandonó el palacio al mismo tiempo que Godbole. Mientras regresaba a su casa —rodeada de un agradable jardín y situada un poco más adelante en la calle principal de la ciudad— vio a su antiguo protector, que le precedía chapoteando y dando saltos por el barro.

—¿Qué tal? —exclamó Aziz, pero no eran aquéllas las palabras adecuadas, porque el devoto hindú indicó con gestos circulares de sus brazos que no deseaba ser molestado—. Lo siento —añadió el joven médico, acertando esta vez, porque Godbole torció la cabeza hasta que dejó de pertenecer a su cuerpo, y dijo con una voz forzada que no tenía conexión alguna con su mente:

—Quizás esté ya en el Pabellón de Invitados de Oficiales…, al menos, cabe dentro de lo posible.

—¿De verdad? ¿A qué hora?

Pero hablar del tiempo era ya precisar demasiado. Godbole agitó débilmente un brazo y desapareció. Aziz sabía que estaban hablando de Fielding, pero no quería pensar en él, porque se trataba de un elemento perturbador en su vida, y aún confiaba en que la crecida del río le impidiese llegar. Una pequeña corriente brotaba bajo la puerta de su jardín y logró renovar sus esperanzas. Era imposible que nadie consiguiera cruzar desde Deora con un tiempo como aquel. Fielding venía en visita oficial. Había

sido trasladado de Chandrapore y enviado a recorrer la India Central para comprobar lo que los Estados más apartados estaban haciendo en relación con la educación inglesa. Se había casado, había hecho lo que se esperaba con Miss Quested, y Aziz no tenía el menor deseo de volver a verlo.

«Inefable Godbole», pensó, sonriendo. El joven médico carecía de curiosidad religiosa, y no había llegado a descubrir el significado de aquella exótica ceremonia que se celebraba una vez al año, pero estaba totalmente convencido de que Godbole era una excelente persona. Aziz había llegado a Mau gracias a él y seguía allí por la misma razón. Sin su ayuda nunca hubiera entendido problemas completamente distintos de los de Chandrapore. Porque aquí la distancia era entre brahmán y no-brahmán; musulmanes e ingleses quedaban totalmente al margen, y a veces no se les mencionaba durante días. Como Godbole era brahmán, Aziz también lo era cuando se trataba de intrigar; a menudo bromeaban juntos acerca de ello. Las fisuras del suelo indio son infinitas: el hinduismo, que parece tan sólido desde lejos, está dividido en sectas y clanes, que se bifurcan y se unen, y cambian de nombre según el aspecto desde el que se los examina. Si alguien estudia el hinduismo durante años con los mejores profesores, descubre al levantar la cabeza que nada de lo que le han dicho encaja realmente. Aziz, el día de su toma de posesión, había hecho notar: «Yo no examino nada, solamente respeto», causando con ello una excelente impresión. En el momento presente los prejuicios contra él eran mínimos. Aunque se hallaba nominalmente a las órdenes de un doctor hindú, Aziz era en realidad el médico más importante de la corte. Había tenido que renunciar a las inoculaciones y otros caprichos occidentales del mismo estilo, pero también en Chandrapore su profesión había sido un juego, centrado en torno a la mesa de operaciones, y allí, en aquel lugar apartado, permitía que se le oxidaran los bisturíes, dirigía su pequeño hospital a medio rendimiento y no causaba innecesaria alarma.

El impulso que le había llevado a escapar de los ingleses era correcto. Le habían asustado de manera definitiva, y sólo existen dos reacciones contra el miedo: patalear y gritar en los comités, o retirarse a una remota jungla donde el *sahw* apenas aparece. Sus viejos amigos abogados querían

que se quedara en la India británica y colaborara en las tareas de agitación, y quizá le hubieran convencido de no ser por la traición de Fielding. La noticia no había sorprendido a Aziz en absoluto. La primera fisura entre ellos había surgido inmediatamente después del juicio, cuando Cyril no tomó parte en el cortejo; la defensa de la muchacha la había hecho más honda; luego llegaron las postales desde Venecia, tan frías y tan poco amistosas que todos estuvieron de acuerdo en que algo iba mal; y, finalmente, después de un silencio, la esperada carta desde Hampstead. Mahmoud Ali estaba con Aziz en aquel momento. «Voy a darte una noticia que te sorprenderá. Me caso con alguien a quien conoces…» Aziz no siguió leyendo.

—Ahí tienes, contéstala por mí.

Y se la arrojó a Mahmoud Ali.

Las cartas posteriores las rompió sin abrir. Era el final de un estúpido experimento. Y, aunque a veces, en algún apartado rincón de su mente sentía que Fielding había hecho sacrificios por él, todo ello quedaba mezclado con un odio totalmente genuino hacia los ingleses. «Por fin soy indio», pensó Aziz, inmóvil bajo la lluvia.

La vida transcurría agradablemente; el clima era saludable, de manera que sus hijos podían pasar todo el año con él; había vuelto a casarse —no se trataba exactamente de un matrimonio, pero a Aziz le gustaba considerarlo como si lo fuera—; leía en persa; escribía poesía; tenía caballo, y a veces lograba cazar algo cuando los buenos hindúes miraban en la otra dirección. Todos sus poemas se ocupaban del mismo tema: la condición de la mujer oriental. «El *purdah* tiene que desaparecer» porque es una carga insostenible, «de lo contrario nunca seremos libres». Y también declaraba (dejándose llevar enteramente por la fantasía) que la India no hubiese sido conquistada si en Plassey[18] hubiesen luchado las mujeres además de los hombres. «Pero no hemos de permitir que los extranjeros vean a nuestras mujeres» (sin explicar cómo se lograría esto último, debido a estar escribiendo un poema). *Bulbules* y rosas seguían apareciendo: Aziz aún llevaba en la sangre el patetismo del Islam derrotado y no podía expulsarlo mediante el recurso a la modernidad. Los suyos eran unos poemas tan

ilógicos como su autor. Pero decían una cosa acertada: no podía existir una patria sin nuevos hogares. En un poema —el único que le gustaba al pintoresco Godbole— Aziz había prescindido de la patria (a la que no amaba de verdad) para ir directamente a la internacionalidad.

—¡Ah! Esto es *bhakti*—, esto, mi joven amigo, es diferente y muy bueno. La India, que parece no moverse, irá directamente a ello mientras las otras naciones pierden el tiempo. ¿Me permite traducir este poema al hindú? En realidad es tan instructivo que casi podría verterse al sánscrito. Sí, claro, todos sus otros poemas son también muy buenos. Su Alteza le decía al Coronel Maggs durante su última visita que estamos muy orgullosos de usted —sonriendo tímidamente.

El Coronel Maggs era el Comisionado Político de la zona y desalentado oponente político de Aziz. El Departamento de Investigación Criminal no perdía de vista al joven médico a partir del proceso: no tenían nada concreto en contra suya, pero hay que vigilar a los indios que han tenido mala suerte, y, gracias a la equivocación de Miss Quested, Aziz permanecería en observación hasta el final de sus días. El Coronel Maggs se sintió lleno de preocupación al saber que un sospechoso iba a trasladarse a Mau, y, adoptando un tono de broma, ridiculizó al anciano Rajá por permitir que un médico musulmán se ocupara de su sagrada persona. Unos años antes el Rajá hubiera prestado oídos a aquella insinuación, porque en aquellos tiempos el Comisionado Político era una figura formidable, capaz de desatar todos los truenos del Imperio en los momentos más inoportunos; de trastornar toda la organización política pidiendo automóviles y cacerías de tigres; talas de árboles porque impedían la vista desde el Pabellón de Huéspedes; que se ordeñara a las vacas en su presencia y, en general, atribuyéndose el control de los asuntos internos. Pero se había producido un cambio de estrategia en las altas esferas. Los truenos locales ya no encontraban respaldo, y el grupo de pequeños Estados que componían la Comisaría se habían enterado de ello y empezado a cambiar impresiones, con provechosos resultados. Ver lo mucho —o lo poco— que el Coronel Maggs estaba dispuesto a soportar se convirtió en un agradable pasatiempo, y todos los Departamentos de Estado de Mau se dedicaban a él. El Coronel

Maggs tuvo que aceptar el nombramiento de Aziz. El Rajá hizo caso omiso de la insinuación, pero replicó que los hindúes tenían mentes más amplias que anteriormente, gracias a las esclarecedoras disposiciones del Virrey, y que consideraba un deber suyo avanzar de acuerdo con los tiempos.

Sí, todo había ido bien hasta entonces, pero ahora, cuando el resto del Estado se hallaba sumergido en las festividades religiosas, Aziz tenía que enfrentarse con una crisis de un tipo muy distinto. En su casa le esperaba un mensaje. No quedaba la menor duda de que Fielding había llegado la noche anterior, ni tampoco de que Godbole estaba enterado de ello, porque el mensaje era para él, y el viejo profesor había escrito al margen: «Estupendas noticias, pero, desgraciadamente, mis deberes religiosos me impiden tomar ninguna iniciativa.» Fielding explicaba que había inspeccionado Mudkul (el antiguo coto de Miss Derek), que casi se había ahogado en Deora, que había llegado a Mau de acuerdo con el calendario previsto, y que esperaba permanecer allí dos días, estudiando las diferentes innovaciones pedagógicas de su antiguo amigo. Y Fielding no había venido solo. Le acompañaban su mujer y su cuñado. Y a continuación la nota se convertía en el típico mensaje que se recibía K siempre del Pabellón de los Huéspedes Oficiales. Pidiendo algo.

Faltaban huevos. Mosquiteros rotos. ¿Cuándo podrían presentar sus respetos a Su Alteza? ¿Era cierto que iba a celebrarse una procesión a la luz de las antorchas? Si era ése el caso, ¿podían verla ellos? No deseaban causar problemas, pero si fuera posible contemplarla desde un balcón o a bordo de una embarcación… Aziz rompió el mensaje. Ya estaba bien de enseñarle a Miss Quested la vida de los nativos. ¡Bruja traicionera! Mala gente todos ellos. Aziz no perdía la esperanza de evitarlos, aunque quizá resultara difícil, porque sin duda tendrían que quedarse varios días en Mau. Hacia el Sur, las crecidas de los ríos eran todavía peores, y en dirección a la estación de Asirgarh habían aparecido las pálidas superficies grises de varios lagos.

Capítulo trigésimo quinto

Mucho antes de que Aziz descubriera Mau, otro joven musulmán había ido allí a retirarse: un santo. Su madre le dijo: «Pon en libertad a los presos.» De manera que el joven cogió una espada y subió al tuerte. Abrió una puerta y los presos salieron a raudales y volvieron a sus antiguas ocupaciones, pero la policía se enfadó mucho y le cortó la cabeza al joven musulmán quien, ignorando su ausencia, se abrió camino por las rocas que separaban el fuerte de la ciudad, matando policías mientras avanzaba, hasta caer junto a la casa de su madre, después de haber cumplido sus órdenes. El resultado de todo esto era la existencia de dos santuarios dedicados a él —el de la Cabeza arriba y el del Cuerpo abajo—, que son lugares de devoción para los pocos musulmanes que viven cerca, y también para los hindúes. «No hay más dios que Dios»; tan simétrica amonestación se desvanece en el suave aire de Mau; es algo que pertenece a peregrinaciones y universidades, no al feudalismo y a la agricultura. Cuando Aziz descubrió al llegar que también el Islam era idólatra, se sintió lleno de desprecio y quiso purificar aquel lugar, como Alamgir. Pero en seguida dejó de importarle, como a Akbar. Después de todo, aquel santo había puesto en libertad a los presos, y él mismo había estado en la cárcel. El Santuario del Cuerpo se hallaba en su propio jardín y producía una cosecha semanal de lámparas y flores, y cuando Aziz las veía recordaba sus sufrimientos. Al Santuario de

la Cabeza se llegaba dando un agradable paseo bastante corto, muy adecuado para los niños. El joven médico tenía libre la mañana después del gran *pujab,* y les dijo a sus hijos que le acompañaran. Jamila le cogió de la mano. Ahmed y Karim corrieron delante, discutiendo sobre el aspecto que tenía el cuerpo mientras descendía a trompicones, y si les hubiera dado miedo encontrarse con él. Aziz no quería que fueran supersticiosos y les riñó; ellos respondieron «Sí, padre», porque estaban bien educados, pero, como el mismo Aziz, eran sordos a los razonamientos, y después de una pausa cortés, siguieron diciendo lo que su naturaleza les impulsaba a decir.

En lo alto de la ladera se alzaba un edificio octogonal, alto y esbelto, rodeado de algunos matorrales: el Santuario de la Cabeza. Carecía de techo y-no era en realidad más que un biombo protector.

Dentro se agazapaba una humilde cúpula y en su interior, visible a través de una reja, se hallaba una lápida mutilada, envuelta en percal blanco. Los ángulos interiores del biombo de piedra estaban ocupados por nidos de abejas, de los que caía constantemente una suave lluvia de alas rotas y otros adminículos aéreos, que habían cubierto de restos el pavimento humedecido. Ahmed, enterado por Mohammed Latif del carácter de la abeja, dijo: «No nos atacarán, porque nuestras vidas son castas», y se introdujo audazmente en el santuario; su hermana fue más cauta. De allí pasaron a una mezquita, que, por tamaño y decoración, parecía una de esas pantallas que se colocan delante del hogar de la chimenea; los arcos de Chandrapore habían quedado reducidos a una lisa extensión de estuco de carácter ornamental, con protuberancias en los extremos que creaban la impresión de dos minaretes, Aquella cosa tan ridícula ni siquiera se mantenía derecha, porque la roca sobre la que estaba situada había empezado a resbalar colina abajo. La mezquita y el santuario constituían una extraña consecuencia de las protestas de Arabía.

Aziz y sus hijos se pasearon por el viejo fuerte, ahora desierto, y admiraron las diferentes vistas. El panorama, según sus criterios, era encantador: el cielo gris y negro, nubes panzudas repletas de lluvia por todas partes, la tierra picada de charcos y resbaladiza por el fango. Un magnífico monzón, el mejor en tres años; los estanques ya estaban llenos y

posiblemente la cosecha sería excepcional. En dirección al río (la ruta por la que Fielding había escapado de Deora) el aguacero había sido enorme, haciendo necesario recurrir a cuerdas para pasar al otro lado las sacas del correo. Desde allí podían ver, entre los árboles del bosque, la abertura por donde bajaba el desfiladero, y encima las rocas que señalaban el emplazamiento de la mina de diamantes, resplandecientes por la humedad. Por debajo y muy cerca se hallaba la residencia de la *Rani* más joven, aislada por la inundación, y era posible ver a Su Alteza, que no daba mucha importancia al *purdah*, chapoteando en el jardín con sus doncellas, y agitando el *sari* en dirección a los monos instalados sobre el tejado. Pero quizá fuera mejor no mirar en aquella dirección, ni tampoco hacia el pabellón de los Huéspedes Oficiales. Más allá de este último se alzaban, como una penumbra gris-verdosa, colinas cubiertas con templos semejantes a pequeñas llantas blancas. Sólo en aquella dirección había más de doscientos dioses que se visitaban unos a otros constantemente y eran propietarios de numerosas vacas y de toda la industria de la hoja de betel, además de una participación en el autobús de Asirgarh. Muchos de ellos se hallaban en palacio en aquel momento, pasándolo estupendamente; otros, demasiado voluminosos o con demasiado orgullo para viajar, habían enviado símbolos que los representaran El aire estaba lleno de lluvia y de religión.

Ahmed y Karim —sus camisas blancas ondeando al viento— corrieron por todo el fuerte, gritando de alegría. En seguida se tropezaron con una fila de presos, que contemplaban distraídamente un viejo cañón de bronce.

—¿Cuál de vosotros será perdonado? —preguntaron los niños.

Porque aquella noche era la procesión del Dios Principal, que saldría del palacio, escoltado por todo el poder del Estado, y pasaría junto a la cárcel, que se hallaba ahora abajo, en la ciudad. Cuando el Dios cruzara ante el establecimiento penitenciario, agitando las aguas de nuestra civilización[19], uno de los presos sería puesto en libertad; después el divino viajero se internaría en el gran estanque de Mau, que llegaba hasta el jardín del Pabellón de los Huéspedes, donde sucedería alguna otra cosa, una gran apoteosis final o quizás algo de menor importancia; a continuación el Dios

se sometería a la experiencia del sueño. Aziz y su familia, por ser musulmanes, no estaban al tanto de todo esto, pero la visita a la cárcel sí era de dominio común. Sonriendo, sin levantar los ojos, los presos comentaron con aquellas personas acomodadas sus posibilidades de libertad. Tan sólo los grilletes que llevaban en las piernas les diferenciaban de otros hombres, y tampoco ellos se sentían distintos. Los cinco que se hallaban aún pendientes de juicio no podían alcanzar el perdón, pero todos los condenados estaban llenos de esperanza. Para ellos no existía distinción entre el Dios y el Rajá: ambos quedaban demasiado por encima de sus posibilidades; pero su guardián era un hombre mejor educado y se atrevió a preguntar por la salud de Su Alteza.

—Sigue mejorando —replicó el joven médico.

La verdad era que el Rajá había muerto; la ceremonia de la noche anterior había resultado excesiva para sus fuerzas, y se ocultaba su muerte para no oscurecer el esplendor de la festividad. El médico hindú, el Secretario Privado y un criado de confianza custodiaban el cadáver, mientras Aziz, por su parte, se dejaba ver en público para no despertar sospechas. El joven médico había sentido un gran afecto por el desaparecido Soberano, y era posible que no prosperara bajo su sucesor, pero todavía no era capaz de preocuparse por semejantes problemas, inmerso como se hallaba en la ilusión que estaba ayudando a crear. Los niños siguieron corriendo por el fuerte, buscando, con insensato entusiasmo, una rana que meter en la cama de Mohammed Latif. Cientos de ranas vivían en su propio jardín, pero querían una del fuerte. Ellos mismos dieron la noticia de que se divisaban dos cascos. Fielding y su cuñado, en lugar de descansar después del viaje, estaban subiéndola ladera camino de la tumba del santo.

—¿Les tiramos piedras? —preguntó Karim.

—¿Les ponemos cristal pulverizado en el *pan?*

—Ahmed, ven aquí para que te castigue por decir esa maldad.

Aziz alzó la mano para golpear a su primogénito, pero le permitió, en cambio, que se la besara.

Era muy agradable tener a sus hijos con él en aquel momento, y saberlos afectuosos y valientes. Les hizo ver que los ingleses eran huéspedes oficiales y no se les podía envenenar, recibiendo, como siempre, una dócil aunque entusiasta aquiescencia a sus palabras.

Los dos visitantes entraron en el edificio octogonal, pero salieron en seguida a toda prisa, perseguidos por algunas abejas. Los vieron correr de un lado a otro, golpeándose la cabeza con las manos; los niños gritaron, burlándose, y del cielo, repentinamente, como si alguien hubiese quitado un tapón, cayó un agradable aguacero. Aziz no había tenido intención de saludar a su antiguo amigo, pero el incidente le puso de excelente humor.

—¿Qué tal, caballeros? ¿Tienen algún problema? —gritó.

El cuñado de Fielding dejó escapar una exclamación; una abeja le había picado.

—Túmbese en un charco…, aquí hay muchos. No se acerque a mí, yo no soy capaz de controlarlas, son abejas del Estado; quéjese a Su Alteza de su comportamiento. —No había ningún peligro en realidad, porque llovía cada vez con más fuerza. El enjambre se retiró hacia el santuario. Aziz se acercó al desconocido y le extrajo un par de aguijones de la muñeca—. Vamos, serénese y pórtese como un hombre.

—¿Qué tal estás, Aziz, después de tanto tiempo? Supe que te habías instalado aquí —exclamó Fielding; la entonación de su voz, sin embargo, no era amistosa—. Imagino que un par de picaduras no tienen importancia.

—Ninguna. Mandaré un ungüento al Pabellón de Huéspedes. He oído que se han instalado ustedes allí.

—¿Por qué no contestaste a mis cartas? —preguntó Fielding, tratando de ir directamente al grano, pero sin conseguirlo, porque el agua caía otra vez a cántaros. Su acompañante, nuevo en el país, exclamó, al sentir el golpeteo de las gotas sobre el casco, que las abejas estaban reanudando el ataque. Fielding interrumpió sus desorbitados gestos con cierta brusquedad y luego dijo—: ¿Existe algún atajo para llegar hasta nuestro coche? Más vale que abandonemos el paseo. Este tiempo es una verdadera pesadilla.

—Sí. Sigan por ahí.

—¿No bajas tú también?

Aziz esbozó una cómica reverencia; como todos los indios, era muy hábil a la hora de mostrarse sutilmente impertinente. «Tiemblo y obedezco», decía el gesto, y Fielding lo entendió perfectamente. Bajaron hacia el camino por una senda muy accidentada —los dos hombres delante; el cuñado (muchacho más que hombre) detrás, muy cariacontecido porque le dolía el brazo; los tres niños indios los últimos, ruidosos y desvergonzados—, todos ellos calados hasta los huesos.

—¿Qué tal te van las cosas, Aziz?

—Disfruto de buena salud, como de costumbre.

—¿Sacas algo en limpio de tu vida aquí?

—¿Cuánto saca usted en limpio de la suya?

—¿Quién se encarga del Pabellón de los Huéspedes? —respondió Fielding, renunciando a su tímido esfuerzo por recobrar la perdida intimidad, y adoptando un tono más oficial; el antiguo Director del Instituto de Chandrapore se había hecho más viejo y menos flexible.

—El Secretario Privado de Su Alteza, probablemente.

—¿Dónde está, entonces?

—No lo sé.

—Porque desde que llegamos no se ha acercado ni un alma a saludarnos.

—¿Es posible?

—Escribí con anticipación al *Durbar*, preguntando si era oportuna una visita nuestra. Se me dijo que sí, y preparé mi viaje de acuerdo con ello; pero los criados no parecen tener instrucciones concretas; no hemos podido conseguir huevos, y además mi mujer quiere salir a pasear en la barca.

—Hay dos.

—Sí, pero faltan los remos.

—El Coronel Maggs los rompió en su última visita.

—¿Los cuatro?

—Es un hombre extraordinariamente fuerte.

—Si mejora el tiempo, esta noche querríamos ver la procesión con antorchas desde el agua —siguió Fielding—. Escribí a Godbole acerca de ello, pero no parece haberse enterado: es como estar en un cementerio.

—Quizá su carta nunca llegó a manos del Ministro en cuestión.

—¿Existe alguna norma en contra de que los ingleses presencien la ceremonia?

—No sé absolutamente nada sobre la religión local. A mí personalmente nunca se me ocurriría asistir a una procesión.

—Tuvimos un recibimiento muy distinto en Mudkul en Deora; en Deora especialmente todo fueron amabilidades, el Maharajá y la Maharaní no querían que nos fuésemos sin verlo todo.

—Debieran ustedes haberse quedado con ellos.

—Sube, Ralph.

Habían llegado al sitio donde esperaba el coche.

—Suban, Mr. Quested y Mr. Fielding.

—¿Quién demonios es Mr. Quested?

—¿Acaso pronuncio mal un apellido que conozco tan bien? ¿No es el hermano de su mujer?

—¿Con quién demonios crees que me he casado?

—Me llamo Ralph Moore —dijo el muchacho, poniéndose colorado, y al mismo tiempo cayó otro chaparrón que hizo surgir un vaho alrededor de sus pies.

Aziz trató de apartarse, pero era demasiado tarde.

—¿Quested? ¿Quested? ¿No sabías que mi mujer era la hija de Mrs. Moore?

Aziz empezó a temblar y su rostro adquirió una tonalidad gris morada; aquella noticia le desagradaba profundamente, le desagradaba oír el apellido Moore.

—¿Quizás esto explica tu extraña actitud?

—¿Qué tiene de malo mi actitud?

—La absurda carta que le permitiste escribir a Mahmoud Ali en nombre tuyo.

—Creo que esta conversación no tiene ninguna utilidad.

—¿Cómo pudiste cometer semejante equivocación? —dijo Fielding, en tono más amistoso que antes, pero mordaz y despectivo—. Es casi increíble. Juraría que te escribí media docena de cartas mencionando el

nombre de mi mujer. ¡Miss Quested! ¡Qué idea tan peculiar! —Por su sonrisa, Aziz supuso que Stella era hermosa—. Miss Quested es nuestra mejor amiga, ella nos presentó, pero… qué idea tan curiosa. Luego tenemos que resolver este malentendido, Aziz. Ha sido, sin duda, una estratagema de Mahmoud Ali. Sabe perfectamente bien que me he casado con Miss Moore. La llamaba «hermana de Heaslop» en la insolente carta que me escribió.

Aquel apellido enfureció a Aziz.

—Claro que lo es, y ahí está el hermano de Heaslop, y usted es su cuñado y no hay más que decir. —La vergüenza se había convertido en rabia, devolviéndole su propia estimación—. ¿Qué me importa con quién se haya casado usted? Todo lo que pido es que no venga a molestarme aquí en Mau. No le necesito a usted ni a ninguno de los suyos en mi vida privada, y no voy 1 cambiar de opinión. Sí, sí; ya se que cometí una equivocación estúpida; desprécieme y míreme con frialdad. Creí que se había casado con mi enemiga. No leí su carta. Mahmoud Ali me engañó. Creí queme había robado el dinero, pero —Aziz juntó las manos dando una palmada y sus hijos se congregaron a su alrededor— es como si lo hubiera hecho. A Mahmoud Ali se lo perdono todo, porque estoy seguro de su afecto —luego de hacer una pausa mientras las gotas de lluvia estallaban con ruido de pistoletazos, añadió—: De aquí en adelante mi corazón pertenece únicamente a mi pueblo. —Y se dio la vuelta para marcharse. Cyril le siguió por entre el barro, disculpándose, riendo un poco, queriendo discutir y recomponer, señalando con lógica irrebatible que no se había casado con la prometida de Heaslop, sino con su hermana. ¿Qué importancia podía tener para Aziz la verdad a aquellas alturas? Había edificado su vida sobre una equivocación, pero edificada estaba. Hablando en urdu, para que fe entendieran sus hijos Aziz dijo—: Haga el favor de no seguirnos; da lo mismo con quién se haya casado. No quiero por amigos a ningún inglés ni a ninguna inglesa.

Aziz regresó a su casa feliz y muy excitado. Oír pronunciar el apellido de Mrs. Moore, con los recuerdos que despertaba, le había resultado turbador y misterioso al mismo tiempo. «Esmiss Esmur…», como si la anciana señora viniera a ayudarle. Siempre había sido muy buena con él, y

aquel muchacho al que apenas había mirado era su hijo, Ralph Moore; Stella y Ralph, a quienes había prometido tratar cariñosamente, y Stella se había casado con Cyril.

Capítulo trigésimo sexto

En el palacio continuaba el rasguear de los instrumentos y el resonar de los tambores. La revelación había terminado, pero su efecto duraba, y consistía en hacer creer a los hombres que la revelación no se había producido aún. Subsistía la esperanza a pesar de haberse cumplido lo esperado, como sucederá en el paraíso. Aunque el Dios había nacido, su procesión —que muchos identificaban erróneamente con el Nacimiento— no se había celebrado aún. En años normales, las horas centrales de aquel día quedaban marcadas por actuaciones de gran belleza en las habitaciones privadas del Rajá, poseedor de un grupo de hombres y muchachos consagrados, cuya tarea era danzar en presencia del soberano diferentes actuaciones y meditaciones de su fe. Cómodamente sentado, podía presenciar los Tres Pasos con que el Salvador ascendió a la cumbre del universo para confusión de Indra, también la muerte del dragón, la montaña que se convirtió en paraguas, y el *sadduh* que (con resultados muy cómicos) invocó al Dios antes de comer. Todo culminaba con la danza de las pastoras ante Krishna, y con la danza aún más importante de Krishna delante de las pastoras, cuando la música y los músicos se arremolinaban entre las túnicas azul marino de los actores hasta llegar a sus coronas de oropel y todos se fundían en uno. Entonces el Rajá y sus invitados olvidaban hallarse en presencia de una representación dramática, y adoraban a los actores. Nada

semejante podía suceder aquel día, porque la muerte tiene el poder de interrumpirlo todo. En Mau interrumpía menos que en Europa; su patetismo no era tan intenso, su ironía menos cruel. Desgraciadamente, se hallaban en palacio dos aspirantes al trono, y sospechaban lo que había sucedido, pero no crearon problemas, porque la religión es una fuerza viva para los hindúes, y en ciertos momentos es capaz de suprimir todo lo que haya de mezquino y efímero en sus naturalezas. La festividad continuaba, desordenada y sincera; todos los hombres se amaban entre sí, y evitaban instintivamente cualquier cosa que pudiera producir molestias o dolor.

Aziz no entendía todo esto, como tampoco lo entendería un cristiano corriente. Le asombraba que de repente Mau se viese libre de sospechas y egoísmos. Aunque era un extraño, y quedaba excluido de sus ritos, los hindúes se mostraban particularmente atentos en aquel momento; él y los suyos recibían pequeños presentes y muestras de cortesía, precisamente por ser extraños. Aziz no tenía nada que hacer durante todo el día, excepto enviar el ungüento al Pabellón de los Huéspedes; al atardecer se acordó de ello, y estuvo buscando por la casa un analgésico local, ya que el dispensario estaba cerrado. Encontró una lata de ungüento perteneciente a Mohammed Latif, que estaba poco dispuesto a permitir que se la llevara, porque se habían pronunciado palabras mágicas durante la preparación de aquella pomada, pero Aziz le prometió que se la devolvería después de tratar las picaduras del joven inglés; lo que Aziz quería era una excusa para dar un paseo a caballo.

La procesión empezaba a formarse cuando pasó delante del palacio. Una considerable multitud veía cómo cargaban el palanquín real, cuya proa —con forma de cabeza de dragón y tallada en plata— asomaba por la amplia puerta del palacio, abierta a medias. Dioses, grandes y pequeños, estaban subiendo a bordo. Aziz apartó los ojos, porque nunca sabía cuánto se le permitía mirar, y estuvo a punto de chocar con el Ministro de Educación.

—Ah, podría hacerme llegar tarde.

Dando a entender que el contacto con un no-hindú le obligaría a darse otro baño; Godbole pronunció aquellas palabras sin acaloramiento moral.

—Lo siento —dijo Aziz.

El otro sonrió, y mencionó de nuevo a los ocupantes del Pabellón de Huéspedes, y cuando oyó que, después de todo, Miss Quested no era la esposa de Fielding, exclamó:

—No, claro, se casó con la hermana de Mr. Heaslop. Exactamente. Hace más de un año que lo sé.

—También sin vehemencia alguna en la voz.

—¿Por qué no me lo dijo? Su silencio me ha metido en un buen lío.

Godbole, de quien no se sabía que hubiese contado nunca nada a nadie, sonrió de nuevo, y dijo en tono de disculpa:

—No se enfade conmigo. Ya sabe que, hasta donde mis limitaciones me lo permiten, soy un verdadero amigo suyo. Además, ésta es la más sagrada de nuestras festividades.

Aziz siempre se sentía como un niño pequeño en presencia de aquel ser extraño; como un niño que recibe un juguete inesperado. Sonrió también, e hizo torcer a su caballo por un callejón lateral porque las apreturas eran cada vez mayores. Estaba llegando la Banda de los Basureros. Tocando sus cedazos y otros emblemas de su profesión, iban directamente hacia la puerta del palacio con la actitud de un ejército victorioso. Toda la demás música había cesado, porque ritualmente era aquél el momento de los Despreciados y Abandonados; el Dios no podía salir de Su templo hasta que los sucios basureros tocaran su son: eran el núcleo de suciedad que necesitaba el espíritu para alcanzar la cohesión. Por un instante la escena fue magnífica. Las puertas se abrieron por completo y en el interior del palacio se vio a todos los miembros de la corte, descalzos y vestidos con túnicas blancas; en el centro se hallaba el Arca del Señor, cubierta con tela de oro, flanqueada por abanicos de plumas de pavo real y rígidos estandartes circulares de color carmesí, y llena hasta rebosar de flores y estatuillas. Al alzarse desde el suelo hasta los hombros de los portadores, el amable sol de los monzones empezó a brillar, inundando el mundo de color, de manera que los tigres amarillos pintados en las paredes del palacio parecieron disponerse a saltar, y rosadas y grises madejas de nubes apresaron entre sus lazos la parte más alta del cielo. El palanquín se puso en

movimiento… El callejón estaba lleno de elefantes del Estado, con los castillos vacíos en señal de humildad. Aziz no prestó atención a todos aquellos objetos sagrados, porque carecían de conexión con los que despertaban sus sentimientos religiosos; le aburrían y le hacían sentirse un poco cínico, como a su querido emperador Babur, que bajó del Norte y no encontró en el Indostán ni buenos frutos, ni agua dulce, ni conversaciones ingeniosas; ni siquiera un amigo.

El callejón llevaba muy de prisa fuera de la ciudad, sobre unas rocas muy altas, ya en la jungla. Aziz detuvo allí su caballo y examinó el gran estanque de Mau, que se extendía a sus pies, visible hasta la curva más distante. Al reflejar las nubes del atardecer, llenaba el mundo inferior de un resplandor idéntico, de manera que tierra y cielo se acercaban entre sí, a punto de chocar en pleno éxtasis. Aziz escupió, adoptando de nuevo una actitud cínica, más cínica que la de antes. Por el centro del bruñido círculo del estanque avanzaba una pequeña mancha oscura: el bote del Pabellón de Huéspedes. Los ingleses habían encontrado algo que hiciera las veces de remos, y seguían dedicados a su tarea de inspeccionar la India. Aquello bastó para que, comparativamente, los hindúes le resultaran más simpáticos, y Aziz, volviendo la vista hacia el bulto blanco lechoso del palacio, les deseó que disfrutaran paseando a su ídolo de un sitio a otro, porque, en cualquier caso, aquello no servía para husmear en las vidas de las demás personas. La pose de «ver la lndia» que le había hecho dejarse seducir por Miss Quested en Chandrapore no era más que otra forma de gobernar; detrás no había indicio alguno de afecto; Aziz sabía perfectamente lo que estaba sucediendo en el bote mientras sus ocupantes contemplaban los escalones que la imagen utilizaría para descender al cabo de unos instantes, y se preguntaba hasta dónde podrían acercarse remando sin provocar un conflicto con las autoridades.

Aziz no renunció a su expedición, porque en el Pabellón de los Huéspedes habría criados a los que interrogar; un poco de información que nunca está de más. El joven médico tomó la senda junto al sombrío promontorio que albergaba las tumbas de los reyes. Como el palacio, eran de estuco blanco, y brillaban debido a su luz interna, pero su resplandor se

estaba haciendo fantasmal con la proximidad de la noche. El promontorio se hallaba cubierto de árboles de gran altura, y los murciélagos gigantes empezaban a soltarse de sus copas y a hacer un ruido como de besos al rozar la superficie del estanque; se habían pasado todo el día colgados cabeza abajo y empezaban a tener sed. Los signos de un tranquilo atardecer indio se multiplicaban: ranas por todas partes, estiércol de vaca ardiendo eternamente; por encima, una bandada de cálaos tardíos, con apariencia de esqueletos alados mientras volaban atravesando el crepúsculo. Había muerte en el aire, pero no tristeza; se había llegado a una avenencia entre destino y deseo, y hasta el corazón del hombre se hallaba en calma.

El Pabellón de los Huéspedes estaba situado a doscientos pies por encima del agua, sobre la cresta de un rocoso espolón cubierto de árboles que sobresalía de la jungla. Cuando Aziz llegó allí la superficie del estanque había palidecido, convirtiéndose en una película gris malva, y no se veía el bote por ninguna parte. Un centinela dormía en el porche y había lámparas encendidas en las habitaciones desiertas. Aziz rué recorriéndolas, inquisitivo y avieso. Dos cartas abandonadas sobre el piano recompensaron su curiosidad, y lanzándose sobre ellas, las leyó con prontitud. No se avergonzó de hacerlo. La santidad de la correspondencia privada no ha sido nunca ratificada por el Oriente. Y, además, Mr. McBryde había leído todas sus cartas, publicando después su contenido. Una de ellas —la más interesante de las dos— era de Heaslop a Fielding. Arrojaba nueva luz sobre la mentalidad de su antiguo amigo e hizo que Aziz endureciera aún más su corazón contra él. La carta era en gran parte sobre Ralph Moore, a quien se presentaba casi como un imbécil. «Deshazte de mi hermano cuando lo consideres oportuno. Te digo esto porque sin duda terminará organizando algún lío.» Más adelante: «Estoy completamente de acuerdo; la vida es demasiado breve para alimentar resentimientos, y también me consuela que te sientas capaz, hasta cierto punto, de alinearte con los opresores de la India. Necesitamos todo el apoyo que podamos conseguir. Espeto que la próxima vez que Stella venga a verme lo haga contigo: trataré de ofreceros todas las comodidades que están al alcance de un soltero; ya va siendo hora de que nos veamos, El matrimonio de mi hermana, poco

después de la muerte de mi madre y de mis dificultades personales me molestó y fui muy poco razonable. Pero ha llegado el momento de hacer las paces del todo, como tú dices: basta con repartirnos las culpas a medias. Me alegro mucho de que esté en camino tu hijo y heredero. La próxima vez que alguno de vosotros escriba a Adela, mandadle unas palabras de parte mía, porque también quisiera hacer las paces con ella. Has tenido suerte pudiendo trabajar fuera de la India británica en el momento actual. Los incidentes se suceden sin interrupción, todos debidos a la propaganda, pero no logramos descubrir el hilo conductor. Cuanto más tiempo se vive aquí, más seguridad se tiene de que todo está conectado. Mi opinión personal es que se trata de los judíos.»

Hasta ahí el chico de la nariz encarnada. A Aziz le distrajeron por un instante unos sonidos confusos que llegaban desde el estanque; la procesión se había puesto en marcha. La segunda carta era de Miss Quested a Mr. Fielding. Contenía uno o dos toques interesantes. Su autora confiaba en que «Ralph disfrute con la India más que yo», y parecía haberle dado dinero con ese propósito: «La deuda que nunca podré pagar en persona.» ¿Qué deuda imaginaba Miss Quested haber contraído con el país? A Aziz no le gustó aquella frase. Adela se interesaba por la salud de Ralph Todo eran «Stella y Ralph», incluso «Cyril» y «Ronny»…, todo tan amistoso y razonable, y escrito con una actitud mental que se hallaba por completo fuera del alcance de Aziz. Envidió la fácil comunicación que sólo resulta posible en una nación donde las mujeres son libres. Aquellas cinco personas resolvían sus pequeñas diferencias y cerraban sus maltrechas filas contra los extranjeros. Hasta el mismo Heaslop venía a reforzarlas. De allí surgía la fuerza de Inglaterra, y en una explosión de mal genio, Aziz golpeó el piano, y como las tedas se habían dilatado formando cuerpo en grupos de tres, produjo un ruido considerable.

—¿Quién anda ahí? —dijo una voz llena de nerviosismo y respetuosa a la vez.

Aziz no recordaba dónde había oído antes aquella entonación, Algo se movió en la penumbra de una habitación contigua.

—Médico estatal, visita informativa, muy poco inglés —replicó Aziz, guardándose las cartas en el bolsillo.

Luego, para demostrar que tenía acceso al Pabellón de Huéspedes, golpeó de nuevo el teclado.

Ralph Moore entró en la zona iluminada. Qué joven de aspecto tan extraño, alto, prematuramente envejecido, de grandes ojos azules descoloridos por la ansiedad, y cabello escaso y despeinado! No pertenecía al tipo de los que se exportaban ordinariamente para desempeñar misiones imperiales. «Nacido de una madre demasiado mayor», pensó el médico que había en Aziz; pero al poeta le pareció más bien hermoso.

—No he podido venir antes debido al mucho trabajo. ¿Qué tal están las famosas picaduras de abejas? —preguntó Aziz con tono condescendiente.

—Estaba… descansando; me dijeron que era lo mejor que podía hacer; duelen bastante.

Su timidez y evidente «inexperiencia» tuvieron complicados efectos sobre el descontento Aziz.

—Venga aquí, haga el favor, déjeme verle —le ordenó con tono amenazador.

Estaban prácticamente solos y podía tratar al paciente como Callendar había tratado a Nureddin.

—Esta mañana dijo usted…

—Hasta el mejor médico se equivoca. Venga aquí, haga el favor, para que haga el diagnóstico con buena luz. Dispongo de muy poco tiempo.

—¡Ay!

—¿Qué le sucede?

—Sus manos son crueles.

Aziz, sobresaltado, bajó la vista para mirarlas. Aquel extraño joven tenía razón, y las escondió detrás de la espalda antes de replicar con fingida cólera:

—¿Qué demonios tienen que ver mis manos con usted? Es una observación muy extraña. Soy médico diplomado y no tengo por qué hacerle daño.

—No me importa el dolor; en realidad no me duele.

—¿No hay dolor?

—Prácticamente no.

—Excelentes noticias —se burló Aziz.

—Pero hay crueldad.

—Le he traído un poco de ungüento, pero en su actual estado de nerviosismo aplicárselo se convierte en un problema —continuó Aziz, después de una pausa.

—Haga el favor de dejármelo.

—De ninguna manera. Volverá inmediatamente a mi dispensario. —Aziz se inclinó hacia adelante y el otro se retiró al extremo más alejado de la mesa—. Veamos, ¿quiere usted que le cure las picaduras o prefiere un médico inglés? Hay uno en Asirgarh. Asirgarh queda a cuarenta millas de aquí, y la presa de Ringnod se ha derrumbado.

De manera que ya ve en qué situación se encuentra. Creo que sería mejor hablar de usted con Mr. Fielding; es realmente absurda la manera que tiene de comportarse.

—Han salido a pasear en bote —replicó Ralph, mirando a su alrededor en busca de ayuda.

Aziz fingió sorprenderse en extremo.

—Espero que no hayan ido en dirección a Mau. En una noche como ésta los hindúes se vuelven terriblemente fanáticos.

Y, como para confirmar sus palabras, se oyó un enorme gemido, que parecía brotar de los labios de un gigante; la procesión estaba acercándose a la cárcel.

—No debería usted tratarnos así —le recriminó el muchacho, y esta vez Aziz no pudo ignorar sus palabras, porque la voz, aunque asustada, no era débil en absoluto.

—¿Así? ¿De qué manera?

—No le hemos hecho ningún daño, doctor Aziz.

—Ah; ya veo que sabe usted mi nombre. Sí, yo soy Aziz. No, por supuesto; su gran amiga Miss Quested no me hizo ningún daño en las Cuevas de Marabar.

Todos los cañones del Estado ahogaron sus últimas palabras disparando al mismo tiempo. Un cohete lanzado desde el jardín de la cárcel había dado la señal. El preso, alcanzada la libertad, estaba besando los pies de los cantantes. Pétalos de rosas caían desde las casas, mientras otras personas ofrecían especias sagradas y trozos de coco… Era el momento de la mitad del camino; el Dios había extendido Su templo y hacía una pausa llena de exultación. Mezclados y confundidos al trasladarse, los rumores de salvación entraron en el Pabellón de los Huéspedes. Aziz y Ralph, sobresaltados, salieron al porche, atraídos por la repentina iluminación. El cañón de bronce en lo alto del fuerte seguía lanzando llamaradas, la ciudad era una mancha de luz en la que las casas parecían danzar y el palacio asilar unas alas diminutas. Ni el agua, abajo, ni las colinas ni el cielo, arriba, participaban todavía; tan sólo una lucecita y una canción luchaban entre los bultos informes del universo. La canción llegó a hacerse audible gracias a las muchas repeticiones; el coro invocaba a las deidades invirtiendo sus nombres.

Radhakrisbna Radhakrisbna, Radhakrisbna Radhakrisbna, Krishnaradha Radbakrisbna, Radhakrisbna Radhakrtsbna,

cantaban; y despertaron al dormido centinela del Pabellón de Huéspedes, que estaba apoyado en su lanza con punta de hierro.

—Añora tengo que marcharme, buenas noches —dijo Aziz, y tendió la mano a Ralph, olvidando por completo que no eran amigos y dirigiendo su corazón a algo más lejano que las cuevas, algo muy hermoso. El otro aceptó su mano; entonces Aziz recordó lo mal que se había comportado y añadió amablemente—: ¿Ya no me considera cruel?

—No.

—Es usted una persona muy extraña, ¿cómo logra saberlo?

—No tiene ninguna dificultad: es la única cosa de la que siempre estoy seguro.

—¿Siempre es capaz de decir cuándo un extraño es su amigo?

—Sí.

—Entonces es usted un oriental. —Aziz soltó la mano de Ralph mientras hablaba, con un leve estremecimiento. Aquellas mismas palabras

se las había dicho a Mrs. Moore en la mezquita al comienzo del ciclo, y, una vez dentro de él, sólo había logrado librarse después de muchos sufrimientos. ¡Nunca hacer amistad con un inglés! Mezquita, cuevas, mezquita, cuevas. Y ahora vuelta a empezar. Aziz alargó a Ralph el ungüento mágico—: Tómelo, piense en mí cuando lo use. No quiero que me lo devuelva. Debo hacerle un pequeño regalo y eso es lo único que tengo; usted es el hijo de Mrs. Moore.

—Eso sí que lo soy —murmuró Ralph para sí mismo; y una parte de la mente de Aziz que había permanecido escondida pareció ponerse en movimiento camino de la superficie.

—Pero también es el hermano de Heaslop, y, desgraciadamente, las dos naciones no pueden ser amigas.

—Lo sé. Todavía no.

—¿Su madre le habló de mí?

—Sí. —Y con un brusco viraje en la voz y en el cuerpo que Aziz no logró entender, añadió—: En sus cartas, en sus cartas. Le quería mucho.

—Sí, su madre fue el mejor amigo que he tenido. —Aziz guardó silencio, sorprendido ante su enorme gratitud. ¿En qué consistía aquella eterna bondad de Mrs. Moore? En nada, si uno se paraba a pensar en ello. La anciana señora no había declarado a su favor en el juicio, ni había ido a visitarlo a la cárcel, y, sin embargo, se le había metido en lo más profundo del corazón y siempre despertaría en él un sentimiento de veneración—. Éste es nuestro monzón, la mejor época del año —dijo mientras las luces de la procesión ondeaban como si estuvieran bordadas sobre una cortina agitada por el viento—. ¡Cómo me gustaría que Mrs. Moore hubiese visto nuestras lluvias! Ahora es el momento en que todas las cosas son felices, jóvenes y viejas. Esas gentes son felices ahí fuera con sus ruidos salvajes, aunque nosotros no podamos entenderlos; los estanques están llenos, y ellos bailan: eso es la India. Me gustaría que no estuviera usted aquí en visita oficial, porque entonces le enseñaría mi país, pero no puedo hacerlo. Quizá le lleve a dar un breve paseo en bote, nada más que media hora.

¿Empezaba de nuevo el ciclo? Aziz estaba demasiado conmovido para volverse atrás. Tenía que deslizarse fuera en la oscuridad y realizar aquel

acto de homenaje al hijo de Mrs. Moore. Sabía dónde estaban los remos —escondidos para desanimar a los visitantes— y reapareció también con el segundo par, por si acaso se tropezaban con el otro bote; los Fielding se habían servido de unos palos muy largos y quizá se vieran en dificultades, porque el viento se hacía cada vez más fuerte.

Una vez en el agua, Aziz se sintió completamente a gusto. En él, la primera acción amable siempre se convertía en canal para otra, y muy pronto el torrente de su hospitalidad brotó incontenible, y empezó a hacer los honores de Mau y a convencerse a sí mismo de que entendía la bárbara procesión, cuyas luces y ruidos iban en aumento a medida que se desarrollaban las complejidades de su ritual. Apenas necesitaban remar, porque la brisa refrescante les empujaba hacia donde querían ir. Unas zarzas arañaron la quilla y fueron a chocar con una isleta, asustando a varias cigüeñas. La extraña vida momentánea del agua de la crecida les sostuvo, dando la impresión de que podría durar para siempre.

El bote carecía de timón. Acurrucado en la popa, con el par de remos sobrantes sobre el regazo, el invitado no nacía preguntas sobre cosas de poca importancia. En seguida vieron el destello de un relámpago, seguido inmediatamente de otro: débiles arañazos rojos sobre el inmenso firmamento.

—¿Era eso el Rajá? —preguntó Ralph.

—¿Qué…, qué quiere usted decir?

—Vuelva atrás.

—Pero no hay ningún Rajá…, nada…

—Vuelva atrás y verá lo que quiero decir.

Aziz descubrió que le costaba trabajo remar en contra del viento, pero fijó la mirada en el punto de luz que marcaba la posición del Pabellón de Huéspedes y retrocedió unas cuantas yardas.

—Allí…

Un rey flotaba en la oscuridad, sentado bajo un baldaquín, con resplandecientes vestiduras reales…

—No sé decirle qué es eso, puede estar seguro —susurró Aziz—. Su Alteza ha muerto. Creo que deberíamos volver inmediatamente.

Estaban cerca del promontorio de las tumbas y habían mirado directamente al *chhatri* del padre del Rajá a través de un claro entre los árboles. Esa era la explicación. Aziz había oído hablar de la imagen-echa para imitar la vida y enormemente costosa—, pero no había conseguido verla nunca, a pesar de que remaba con frecuencia en el lago. Sólo había un sitio desde donde podía divisarse, y Ralph le había conducido a él. Aziz se alejó de allí con cierta precipitación, sintiendo que su compañero era más guía que visitante.

—¿No deberíamos volver? —hizo notar.

—La procesión no ha terminado.

—Yo no me acercaría más…, tienen unas costumbres muy extrañas y podrían hacerle daño.

—Sólo un poquito más cerca.

Aziz obedeció. Sabía con el corazón que aquél era el hijo de Mrs. Moore y, verdaderamente, hasta que su corazón se comprometía Aziz no entendía nada en absoluto. «Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Krishnaradha», seguía la salmodia; luego se modificó súbitamente, y en el intervalo Aziz oyó, casi con seguridad, las sílabas de salvación que habían sonado durante su proceso de Chandrapore.

—Mr. Moore, no le cuente a nadie que el Rajá ha muerto. Todavía es un secreto y yo no estoy autorizado para decirlo. Fingiremos que sigue vivo hasta que termine la festividad, para evitar la tristeza. ¿Quiere acercarse todavía más?

—Sí.

Aziz trató de mantener el bote lejos del resplandor de las antorchas que empezaban a brillar en la orilla opuesta. Seguían estallando cohetes, y también disparaban los cañones. De repente, más cerca de lo que el joven médico había calculado, el palanquín de Krishna apareció detrás de una pared en ruinas y descendió los resplandecientes escalones tallados que llevaban hasta el estanque. A ambos lados brincaban los cantantes, una mujer destacando sobre todos» una joven santa —hermosa y frenética— con flores en el pelo, que alababa a Dios sin atributos: era así como ella lo percibía. Otros lo alababan con atributos, viéndolo en este o en aquel

órgano del cuerpo o manifestación del cielo. Todos corrieron hasta la orilla y se quedaron en pie entre olas de pequeño tamaño; se preparó una comida sagrada y los que se sintieron dignos participaron en ella. El viejo Godbole descubrió el bote, que iba a la deriva empujado por el viento, y. agitó los brazos (Aziz nunca logró descubrir si en gesto de alegría o de indignación). Más arriba quedaba el poder secular de Manu —elefantes, artillería, multitudes— y por encima de ellos comenzó una feroz tormenta, confinada momentáneamente a las regiones más elevadas de la atmósfera. Ráfagas de viento mezclaban luz y oscuridad, cortinas de lluvia avanzaban desde el Norte, se detenían, avanzaban desde el Sur, se alzaban desde detrás, y entre ellas luchaban los cantantes, profiriendo todas las notas excepto la del terror y preparándose a arrojar a Dios (aunque Dios no pueda ser arrojado) a la tormenta. Así se le arrojaba año tras año, y también otras cosas, pequeñas imágenes de Ganpati[20], cestos de maíz de diez días, diminutas *tazias* en recuerdo de *muharram*: chivos expiatorios, cáscaras vacías, símbolos de tránsito: un tránsito nada fácil, de ahora, no de aquí, que sólo puede percibirse cuando ya es inalcanzable; el Dios que había de arrojarse era un símbolo de todo ello.

La aldea de Gokul reapareció sobre su bandeja. Sustituía a la imagen de plata, que nunca abandonaba su escondrijo entre las flores; la aldea tenía que perecer en representación de otro símbolo. Un servidor la tomó entre sus manos y procedió a arrancar los estandartes azules y blancos. Iba desnudo, ancho de hombros, estrecho de cintura —el cuerpo indio una vez más triunfante—, y le correspondía por herencia la tarea de cerrar las puertas de la salvación. Se introdujo en las oscuras aguas empujando la aldea delante de sí, hasta que las figurillas de barro abandonaron sus asientos y empezaron a deshacerse bajo la lluvia, y el Rey Kansa se confundió con el padre y la madre del Señor. Oscuras y sólidas, las pequeñas olas iban realizando su tarea; luego una ola más grande lo anegó todo y voces inglesas exclamaron «¡Cuidado!» Los botes habían chocado entre sí.

Los cuatro intrusos extendieron los brazos y se agarraron unos a otros, y, con remos y palos fuera del agua, giraron en el torbellino como un

monstruo mítico. Los devotos aullaron de indignación o de alegría, mientras los botes se dirigían, impotentes, contra el servidor, que les esperó sin que su hermoso rostro moreno cambiara de expresión. Cuando los últimos fragmentos de barro se estaban deshaciendo, la bandeja tropezó con uno de los botes.

El golpe fue mínimo, pero Stella, la más próxima al lugar del impacto, se refugió en brazos de su marido, luego se inclinó hacia adelante, después se arrojó contra Aziz y volcó los botes con sus movimientos. Todos se hundieron en el agua tibia y poco profunda y lucharon por salir otra vez a la superficie en medio de una explosión de ruido. Los remos, la bandeja sagrada, las cartas de Ronny y Adela flotaron juntos en confuso revoltijo. Los cañones hicieron fuego, redoblaron los tambores, barritaron los elefantes y, ahogándolo todo, un trueno inmenso, sin acompañamiento de relámpago, golpeó como un mazo la cúpula del firmamento.

Aquello fue la apoteosis, hasta donde es posible hablar en la India de semejante cosa. La lluvia se consagró con total dedicación a su tarea de empaparlo todo y a todos, y muy pronto echó a perderla tela de oro del palanquín y los costosos estandartes circulares, Algunas de las antorchas se apagaron, los fuegos artificiales no se encendían, disminuyeron los cánticos, y la bandeja volvió al profesor Godbole, quien recogió un fragmento de barro que seguía adherido a ella y se embadurnó la frente sin mucha ceremonia. Lo que hubiese sucedido había sucedido, y mientras los intrusos se reponían del chapuzón, la multitud de hindúes inició una confusa retirada hacia la ciudad. La imagen del Dios también regresó, y al día siguiente tuvo que someterse a una muerte privada especialmente reservada para ella, cuando unas cortinas de color magenta y verde ocultaron de nuevo a la vista de los fieles el santuario dinástico. Los cánticos continuaron aún por más tiempo…, bordes deshilachados de la religión…, insatisfactoria maraña sin dramatismo alguno… «Dios se amor.» Volviendo la vista a la gran confusión de las últimas veinticuatro horas, nadie estaba en condiciones de explicar cuál era su centro emocional, de la misma manera que tampoco podría localizarse el corazón de una nube.

Capítulo trigésimo séptimo

Otra vez amigos, pero conscientes de que nunca volverían a verse, Aziz y Fielding salieron a dar un último paseo a caballo por la jungla de Mau. El nivel del agua estaba bajando y se había anunciado oficialmente la muerte del Raja, de manera que los ocupantes del Pabellón de Huéspedes iban a marcharse a la mañana siguiente, como exige el decoro. Debido al luto y a la festividad, la visita había resultado un fracaso. Fielding apenas había visto a Godbole, quien todos los días prometía enseñarle el Instituto del Rey-Emperador Jorge Quinto, principal objetivo de su visita, pero siempre encontraba alguna excusa para no hacerlo. Aquella tarde Aziz le explicó lo que había sucedido: el Rey-Emperador había sido convertido en granero y al Ministro de Educación no le apetecía confesárselo a su antiguo Director. No hacía aún un año que el Comisionado Político del Gobernador General inaugurara el centro docente y aún seguía funcionando en teoría; Godbole confiaba en volver a empezar antes de que se notara su ausencia y en reunir a sus alumnos antes de que éstos produjeran una nueva generación de escolares. Fielding rió ante tanta confusión y despilfarro de energías, pero ya no viajaba tan ligero de equipaje como en el pasado; la educación era una preocupación constante para él porque sus ingresos y el bienestar de su familia dependían de ello. Sabía que pocos indios consideran la educación buena en sí misma, y ahora deploraba esta actitud por motivos que cada vez

resultaban más amplios. Empezó a decir algo de mucho peso sobre el tema de los Estados nativos, pero la cordialidad de Aziz le distrajo. Al menos aquella reconciliación era todo un éxito. Después del pintoresco naufragio no había habido ya incomprensión ni resentimiento, y los dos habían vuelto riendo a su antigua amistad como si nada hubiese sucedido. Ahora cabalgaban entre rocas y agradables arbustos. En seguida llegaron a un sitio despejado, a plena luz del sol, y vieron un declive cubierto de hierba y de mariposas de vivos colores; también una cobra, que cruzó el camino sin hacer nada en particular y desapareció entre un grupo de guanábanos. En el cielo había redondas nubes blancas, y charcos, también blancos, en la tierra; las colinas que se divisaban a lo lejos eran de color morado. La escena tenía un aire tan de jardín como si se tratara de Inglaterra, pero no por ello dejaba de resultar extraña. Los dos detuvieron a los caballos para darle espacio suficiente a la cobra, y Aziz mostró una carta que deseaba enviar a Miss Quested. Una carta encantadora. El joven médico quería dar las gracias a su antigua enemiga por su excelente comportamiento dos años atrás; ahora estaba perfectamente claro que Miss Quested se había portado bien. «Al caerme al estanque más grande que tenemos en Manu, bajo circunstancias que nuestros amigos le relatarán, pensé en lo valiente que era Miss Quested y resolví decírselo, a pesar de lo defectuoso de mi inglés. Gracias a usted soy feliz aquí en compañía de mis hijos, en lugar de estar en la cárcel: sobre esto no albergo la menor duda. Tenga la seguridad de que enseñaré a mis Hijos a pensar y a hablar acerca de usted con el mayor afecto y respeto imaginables.»

—Miss Quested se sentirá muy feliz. Me alegro de que por fin te hayas dado cuenta de su valentía.

—Quiero portarme amablemente con todo el mundo y acabar para siempre con este desdichado asunto de las Cuevas de Marabar. Me precipité de la manera más vergonzosa al pensar que deseabas quedarte con mi dinero: un error tan absurdo como el de la cueva.

—Me gustaría que hablaras con mi mujer, Aziz. También ella cree que la historia de Marabar ha concluido para siempre.

—¿Cómo es eso?

—No lo sé, quizá te lo cuente a ti, a mí no quiere decírmelo. Stella tiene ideas que yo no comparto; de hecho, cuando no estoy con ella me parecen ridículas. En cambio, cuando estamos juntos, supongo que es por el cariño que le tengo, todo resulta distinto, y siento que estoy medio muerto, y ciego también a medias. Mi mujer busca algo. Tú y yo y Miss Quested, hablando *grosso modo*, no vamos en busca de nada. Seguimos adelante lo mejor que podemos, tú al frente, un poco destacado; un grupito muy loable. Pero mi mujer no va con nosotros.

—¿Qué quieres decir? ¿Acaso Stella no te es fiel, Cyril? Me llenas de preocupación.

Fielding vaciló. No se sentía completamente feliz acerca de su matrimonio. Había vuelto a experimentar la pasión física —la llamarada final antes de las cenizas de la mediana edad—, sabía que su mujer no le amaba tanto como él la amaba a ella y se avergonzaba de importunarla. Pero durante la visita a Mau la situación había mejorado. Por fin parecía existir un lazo entre ellos: ese lazo exterior a los participantes necesario en toda relación. En el lenguaje de la teología cabía decir que su unión había sido bendecida. Podía asegurarle a Aziz que Stella no sólo le era fiel, sino que lo más probable era que lo fuera cada vez más; y, tratando de expresar lo que no estaba claro para él mismo, añadió estúpidamente que personas distintas tienen diferentes puntos de vista.

—Si no quieres hablar con Stella acerca de Marabar, ¿por qué no lo haces con Ralph? Es realmente un muchacho muy sagaz. Y (otra vez la misma metáfora) cabalga un poco detrás de Stella, pero con ella.

—Explícale que no tengo nada que decirle, aunque sin duda es un muchacho capaz de comprender muchas cosas y cuenta para siempre con un amigo indio. En parte, siento un gran cariño hacia él porque me ha hecho volver junto a ti para decirte adiós. Porque esto es una despedida, Cyril, aunque pensar en ello echaría a perder nuestro paseo y nos pondría tristes.

—No, no vamos a pensar en ello. —También Fielding sentía que aquélla era su última oportunidad para comunicarse libremente. Todos los estúpidos malentendidos habían quedado aclarados, pero socialmente Aziz y él carecían de un sitio donde reunirse. El antiguo Director del Instituto de

Chandrapore había unido su suerte a la de la India inglesa al casarse con una de sus compatriotas, y estaba adquiriendo algunas de sus limitaciones; incluso empezaba a sorprenderse de su pasado heroísmo. ¿Volvería ahora a desafiar a toda su gente por el bien de un indio maltratado? Aziz era un recordatorio, un trofeo; cada uno estaba orgulloso del otro, y, sin embargo, tenían que separarse inevitablemente. Ansioso de sacar el máximo partido posible de aquella última tarde, Fielding hizo un esfuerzo para hablar íntimamente de su mujer, la persona que más quería—. Desde su punto de vista —dijo—, Mau ha sido un éxito. Ha servido para tranquilizarla…, los dos sufren desasosiegos con frecuencia. Stella ha encontrado algo sedante aquí, una especie de solución a sus extraños problemas. —Después de un silencio (con innumerables sonidos como de besos a su alrededor a medida que la tierra chupaba el agua), continuó—:;Tú sabes algo sobre todo este asunto de Krishna?

—Mi querido amigo, oficialmente lo llaman Gokul Ashtami. Todas las oficinas estatales están cerradas, pero, aparte de eso, ¿qué otro interés podría tener para ti y para mí?

—Gokul es la aldea donde nació Krishna…, bueno, más o menos, porque existe la misma vacilación entre esa aldea y otra, que entre Belén y Nazaret. Lo que quisiera descubrir es su lado espiritual, si es que lo tiene.

—No sirve de nada hablar conmigo sobre los hindúes. Vivir con ellos no me ha enseñado nada nuevo. Cuando creo molestarles, no es así. Cuando creo que no les molesto, lo estoy haciendo. Quizá me despidan por caerme sobre su casa de muñecas; por otro lado, quizá me doblen el sueldo. El tiempo lo dirá. ¿Por qué te inspiran tanta curiosidad?

—Es difícil de explicar. En realidad nunca los he entendido ni me han gustado, excepto algunas cosas de Godbole de cuando en cuando. Nuestro buen amigo, ¿todavía sigue diciendo «Ven, ven»?

—Imagino que sí.

Fielding suspiró, abrió los labios, volvió a cerrarlos y luego dijo con una risita:

—No puedo explicarlo, porque no es una cuestión de palabras en absoluto, pero ¿por qué a mi mujer y a su hermano les gusta el hinduismo,

aunque no sienten el menor interés por sus rituales? No quieren hablar de esto conmigo. Saben que, en mi opinión, un determinado aspecto de su vida es una equivocación, y se muestran reservados. Por eso quisiera que hablaras con ellos, porque de todos modos eres un oriental.

Aziz se negó a contestar. No quería ver de nuevo a Stella y a Ralph, sabía que tampoco ellos querían verle, sus secretos no le inspiraban la menor curiosidad, y tenía la impresión de que el bueno de Cyril estaba siendo un poco torpe. Algo —no un suspiro, pero si un sonido— pasó volando junto a él, y le hizo releer la carta para Miss Quested. ¿No había tenido intención de decirle algo más? Sacando la pluma, añadió: «Por mi parte, de ahora en adelante uniré siempre el suyo con un nombre muy sagrado que hay en mi mente, el de Mrs. Moore.» Cuando terminó, el espejo del paisaje se había hecho añicos y el prado se desintegraba en mariposas. Un poema sobre la Meca —la Kaba de la Unión—, los arbustos espinosos donde mueren los peregrinos antes de haber visto al Amigo, pasó rápidamente por su imaginación; pensó también en su esposa; y finalmente todo aquel vuelco semimístico y semisensual, tan característico de la vida de su espíritu, terminó como una avalancha y le dejó en el sitio adecuado: Aziz se encontró cabalgando en la jungla al lado de su querido Cyril.

—Cállate —dijo—. No eches a perder nuestro último paseo con preguntas absurdas. Deja en paz a Krishna y hablemos de algo razonable.

Así lo hicieron. Durante todo el camino de vuelta a Mau discutieron sobre política. Los dos se habían endurecido desde Chandrapore y una buena pelea les resultó muy agradable. Confiaban el uno en el otro aunque iban a separarse, quizá porque iban a separarse. Fielding «no veía ya la necesidad de ser cortés», dijo, dando a entender que no se puede abolir el Imperio británico porque sea grosero.

—De acuerdo, y nosotros no vemos la necesidad de soportaros —replicó Aziz, fulminándolo con miradas llenas de odio abstracto.

—Sin nosotros, los indios se echan a perder inmediatamente —dijo Fielding—,;Mira el Instituto del Rey-Emperador! Mírate tú mismo, olvidando la medicina y volviendo a los conjuros. Mira tus poemas.

—Son muy buenos, me los van a publicar en Bombay.

—Sí, ¿y qué es lo que dicen? Liberemos a nuestras mujeres y la India será libre. Inténtalo, anda. Libera a tu propia mujer antes de nada, y espera a ver quién le lava la cara a Ahmed, a Karim y a Jámila. ¡Hermosa situación!

Aziz se iba excitando cada vez más. Alzándose en los estribos, tiró hacia atrás de la cabeza de su caballo con la esperanza de que se encabritara. Entonces se sentiría enzarzado en una batalla.

—Marchaos todos vosotros, los Turton y los Burton —exclamó—. Deseábamos conoceros hace diez años; ahora es ya demasiado tarde. Si nos reunimos con vosotros y asistimos a vuestros comités es sólo por razones políticas, no os hagáis ilusiones. —Su caballo se encabritó de hecho—. Marchaos, desapareced para siempre. ¿Por qué tenemos que sufrir tanto? Solíamos culparos a vosotros, ahora nos echamos la culpa a nosotros mismos, nos estamos haciendo más prudentes. Mientras Inglaterra no tenga dificultades guardaremos silencio, pero en la próxima guerra europea, ¡ah!, habrá llegado nuestra ocasión.

Hizo una pausa, y el paisaje, aunque sonreía, se desplomaba como una lápida mortuoria sobre cualquier esperanza humana. Pasaron al galope junto a un templo dedicado a Hanuman —tanto amó Dios al mundo2 que se hizo mono—, y también junto a un templo de Siva, que invitaba a la lujuria, pero bajo semblanza de eternidad, con obscenidades que no tenían relación alguna con las de nuestra carne y nuestra sangre. Chapotearon entre mariposas y ranas; grandes árboles con hojas como platos se alzaban entre la maleza. Las divisiones de la vida cotidiana volvían a imponerse, el santuario casi estaba cerrado.

—¿Quién queréis que ocupe el lugar de los ingleses? ¿Los japoneses?

—No, los afganos. Mis propios antepasados.

—Eso encantará a vuestros amigos hindúes, ¿no es cierto?

—Se arreglará…, una conferencia de estadistas orientales.

—No hay duda de que se arreglará.

—Imagino que se trata de la vieja historia de que «Robaremos a todos los nombres y violaremos a todas las mujeres desde Peshawar a Calcuta», que hacéis repetir a alguna persona insignificante y luego citáis todas las semanas en el *Pioneer* para que nos asustemos y os pidamos que os

quedéis. ¡Pero no nos engañaréis más! —De todas formas Aziz no lograba encajar a los afganos en Mau y, sintiéndose acorralado, hizo encabritarse de nuevo a su caballo hasta que recordó que tenía, o debía tener, una patria. Entonces, gritó—: ¡La India será una nación! ¡Sin extranjeros de ninguna clase! ¡Hindúes y musulmanes y sikhs y todos los demás lograrán unirse! ¡Viva! ¡Viva la India!

¡La India una nación! ¡La última adquisición de la gris hermandad del siglo XIX! ¡Acercándose, con amplio contoneo, en esta hora del mundo, a ocupar su sitio! ¡La India, cuyo único igual sería el Sacro Imperio Romano, vendría a emparejarse quizá con Guatemala y con Bélgica! Fielding se burlaba de nuevo. Y Aziz, terriblemente furioso, danzaba de un sitio para otro, sin saber qué hacer.

—Abajo los ingleses de todas formas —exclamó—. Sobre eso no hay la menor duda. Marchaos lo más de prisa que podáis, os lo digo bien claro. Quizá nos odiemos entre nosotros, pero aún os odiamos más a vosotros. Si yo no consigo que os vayáis, lo conseguirá Ahmed, o Karim; aunque tardemos cincuenta o quinientos años nos libraremos de vosotros, sí, arrojaremos al mar al último inglés, y entonces —se lanzó sobre Fielding furiosamente—, y entonces —terminó, medio besándole— tú y yo seremos amigos.

—¿Por qué no podemos ser amigos ahora? —dijo el otro, sujetándolo afectuosamente—. Es lo que yo quiero. Es lo que tú quieres.

Pero los caballos no lo querían: se apartaron bruscamente; la tierra no lo quería, y enviaba rocas junto a las cuales los jinetes tenían que pasaren fila india; los templos, el estanque, la cárcel, el palacio, los pájaros, los animales muertos y el Pabellón de los Huéspedes, que aparecieron al salir ellos del desfiladero y ver Mau a sus pies, tampoco lo querían, y lo dijeron con sus cien voces: «No, todavía no», y el cielo dijo: «No, ahí no.»

FIN

EDWARD MORGAN FORSTER, hijo de un arquitecto, nació en Londres en 1879 y se educó en la Universidad de Cambridge, donde cursó estudios de literatura clásica e historia. A partir de 1901 residió temporadas en Italia y Grecia, y en estos países mediterráneos están ambientados algunos de sus cuentos, como *La historia de la sirena*, y sus dos primeras novelas, *Donde los ángeles no se aventuran* (1905) y *Habitación con vistas* (1908). Cambridge es el escenario de su tercera novela, *El viaje más largo* (1907), y la cuarta, *Howard's end* (1910) —traducida al castellano con el título de *La mansión*—, se sitúa en la ciudad de Londres y sus alrededores. En 1912 y en 1922 vivió en la India, experiencia que noveló en *Pasaje a la India* (1924), obra que confirmó su fama universal como novelista; pero Forster abandonó definitivamente este género y hasta el final de su larga vida sólo cultivó otras modalidades literarias, como libros de viajes, ensayos, cuentos

y biografías: *Alejandría* (1922), *Aspectos de la novela* (1927), *El momento eterno* (1928), *Abinger Harvest* (1936), *Lo que creo* (1939), *Virginia Woolf* (1942), *Dos vivas por la democracia* (1951) y, en colaboración con Eric Crozier, el libreto de la ópera de Benjamin Britten, *Billy Budd* (1951), sobre el célebre relato de Melville. Murió en Coventry en 1970.

Notas

[1] Hafiz (1320-1389), generalmente considerado como uno de los grandes poetas persas. Hadi (1837-1914) escribió en urdu, y Mohammed Iqdal (1875-1938) escribió en urdu, en persa y en panjabi. (Nota del traductor.) <<

[2] El Emperador mongol Shah Jaban construyó el Taj Mahal en Agra, entre 1630 y 1652, como mausoleo para su esposa Mumuz-i-Mahal («Orgullo de Palacio»). <<

[3] Bijapur, ciudad de Mysore, en el Decán, conserva una ciudadela con restos de templos hindúes que atestiguan su importancia en tiempos preislámicos. En los siglos XVI y XVII fue capital de un reino independiente. El eco al que Forster hace referencia se halla en el Gol Gumbaz, el mausoleo de Mohammed Adil Shah. <<

[4] La revuelta de los cipayos en 1857 se caracterizó no sólo por Us atrocidades de los amotinados, sino también por las feroces represalias británicas. *(Nota del traductor.)* <<

[5] Episodio del *Mahabbarata*. El dios Krishna, que se ha convertido en cochero de Arjuna, da a este héroe enseñanzas sobre filosofía y yoga. El más venerado de los textos sagrados de la India. *(Nota del traductor.)* <<

[6] La Vipera Russelli, de color marrón amarillento, es la víbora más común y más peligrosa de la India; mide alrededor de metro y medio y su mordedura es mortal. (Nota del traductor.) <<

[7] Lucknow, capital del Estado de Uttar Pradesh, junto al Gumti, un afluente del Ganges, fue sitiada por espacio de seis meses en 1857, durante la revuelta de los cipayos. (Nota del traductor.) <<

[8] Palabras del general Dyer en Amritsar el 13 de abril de 1919.cuando las tropas británicas abrieron fuego contra la multitud en un espacio abierto conocido por Jallianwala Bagh. Se contabilizaron 379 muertos y alrededor de 1.200 heridos. <<

[9] Monsalvat, Montsalva, Montsalvaze o Mcmsalvach, montaña maravillosa donde, según leyendas de la Edad Media, se celebraba el sacrificio del Santo Grial. Las opiniones sobre su localización difieren, pero según una de ellas Monsalvat sería el Montserrat catalán. *(Nota del traductor.)* <<

[10] Valhala: en la mitología escandinava, la morada de Odín, un espléndido palacio donde los guerreros caídos renuevan su vida marcial, y por las noche», reunidos en torno al dios, celebran orgías sagradas. *(Nota del traductor.)* <<

[11] Referencia a Isaías 9, 5. (Nula del traductor) <<

[12] Colaba es un promontorio (anteriormente isla separada) en el extremo sur de la isla de Bombay. (Nota del traductor.) <<

[13] Laksmi, esposa de Visnú, es la diosa del amor, de la belleza y de la buena fortuna. Al igual que la Afrodita griega, surgió del océano, pero en este caso, y según las epopeyas indias, se trataba del océano de leche de la época primigenia consciente, porque donde domina el oficialismo las relaciones humanas resultan siempre perjudicadas. <<

[14] Simla, ya mencionada anteriormente en el texto, era la sede del Gobierno durante la Estación Cálida, como Delhi durante el resto del arto. (Nota del traductor.) <<

[15] Referencia al evangelio de San Juan, 1, 1: «Al principio existía la Palabra, y la Palabra existía con Dios, y la palabra era Dios.» <<

[16] En 1659, Afzul Khan, gobernador musulmán de Bijapur, al reunirse con Sivaji (fundador del Imperio de los mahrattas) para celebrar conversaciones de paz, fue asesinado por este último, que le abrazó con unos estiletes de acero sujetos a los dedos. <<

[17] Guerras descritas en e! Mahabharata, en las que los Pandavas (es decir, los cinco príncipes del rey Pandu) triunfaron sobre sus primos, los Kauravas, y en las que Krishna intervino como cochero de Arjuna. (Nota del traductor) <<

[18] Plassey (1757) fue la batalla en la que Robert Olive, con un ejército de unos tres mil hombres, derrotó a las fuerzas —muy superiores en número— del Nabab Siray al-Dawla, victoria que dio Bengala a los británicos. (Nota del traductor.) <<

[19] Referencia a San Juan, 5,4 (versículo no aceptado por todos los estudiosos): «Porque un ángel del Señor de cuando en cuando bajaba a! estanque y removía el agua; y el primero que entraba después de la agitación del agua quedaba curado de cualquier enfermedad que tuviera.» (Nota del traductor.) <<

[20] El dios Ganpati o Ganesa, hijo de Siva y Parvati. —Señor de los obstáculos». Se le invoca en todas las empresas, pero es sobre todo patrón de las letras y de los estudiante». Se le representa con cabeza de elefante y montado sobre una rata. <<